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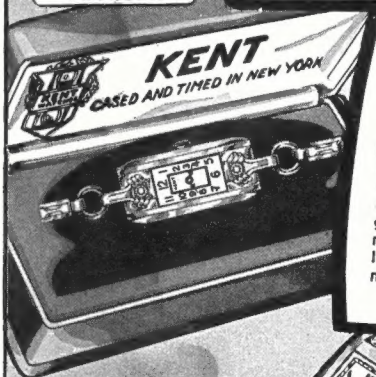

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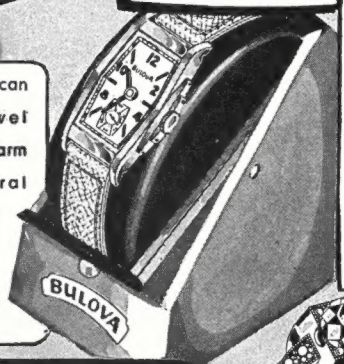

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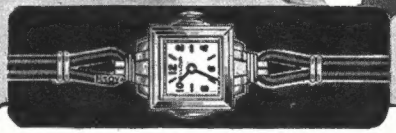

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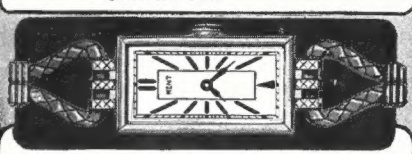

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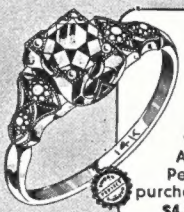

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Vol. CLVII Contents for June 12, 1937 No. 1

A COMPLETE NOVEL

Deserters' Gold . . . . . *Judson Mobley* . . . 37
An outlaw gang, a cowman, and an ex-convict fight it out over gold and a girl.

TWO SERIALS

Menace In Red Chaps . . . . . *Eli Colter* 8
Part One
While a posse seeks him, an outlaw picks violets and opens the way for his redemption.

Trempers Never Cry . . . . . *Seth Ranger* 95
Part Three
Bull Jared plays his last evil hand and loses.

SHORT STORIES

Bullion Bait . . . . . *Lloyd Eric Reeve* . . . 27
An epidemic of gold shipment holdups made a young man decide on a drastic remedy.

Hep Gets The Bird . . . . . *Glenn H. Wichman* . . . 86
A fortune-telling Chinese parrot is believed to be a gold mine.

Rodeo Ransom . . . . . *H. Fredric Young* . . . 113
Dreams can come true, a sleep-lovin' deputy learns.

Dear Meat . . . . . *Cliff Walters* 126
A cowboy rides into a trap and snares a crook.

AN ARTICLE

What Is A Cowboy? . . . . . *Jay Lucas* 123
There are still cowboys in the West, and they are reckless and happy-go-lucky as ever.

MISCELLANEOUS

Dunc Cage . . . . . 112 Old Methods Still Work 125
Drought A Farm Hazard . . . 131

DEPARTMENTS

Interesting And True . . . . . *H. Fredric Young* . . . 85
The Round-up . . . . . *The Editor* 132
Mines And Mining . . . . . *J. A. Thompson* 134
The Hollow Tree . . . . . *Helen Rivers* 136
Where To Go And How To Get There *John North* 139
Guns And Gunners . . . . . *Lieut. Charles E. Chapel* . 142
Missing 144

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31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
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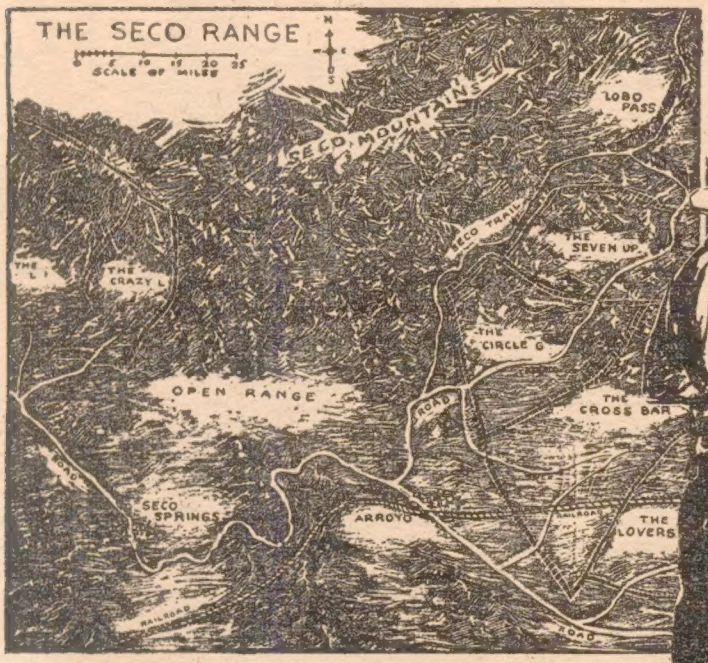

CHAPTER I.

BAD MAN OF THE SECOS.

THERE are only two ways by which a man can be redeemed; by atonement, or by death. In either case, the price paid for the redemption must be the life of the redeemed; life given in willing endeavor to the retraction of wrong doing, and to the building of a future so valiant and so beyond reproach that the discarded past is cast forever into the shadow; or life laid down in heroic sacrifice that the better may survive and clouded issues be cleared, or merely that the slate may be wiped clean of a worthless existence. The decree is absolute. Always the accomplishing of redemption takes one of these two courses. Sometimes it takes both.

In the hot, early-morning sun, in the town of Seco Springs, at the edge of the Seco Mountain foothills, five ranch hands gathered before the bar of the Idle Hour Saloon. They were all talking at once, in that tautness of voice that makes for a strained monotone. They sounded like a lot of angry bees buzzing. The tenseness of the air was such that a man could feel it; he would have needed a skin thicker than cowhide not to feel it.

The five ranch hands were pronouncing the ultimatum that the only redemption possible for Kurt Quillan must be death.

Quillan had been going his own sweet way and killing as he pleased all over the Seco for better than a

RED CHAPS

By ELI COLTER

Author of "Baked-beans Trail," etc.

year. Had he bothered to keep count, there would have been some seven notches on the butts of the heavy caliber guns he carried; only Kurt never bothered. He had never bothered about much of anything. Whenever any one was so indisreet as to cross his path, he merely looked the foolhardy one in the eye and said, "Start shooting!"

Helpless as the victim knew his action to be, he usually reached for his weapon and died, gun in hand, bested by the phenomenal draw of Kurt Quillan. Up till now, Kurt's killings had been visited upon obscure drifters of questionable repute, nondescript characters whose sudden death was unlikely to precipitate any vengeful act of retaliation.

But, two days past, he had crossed the dead line that had in the last twelve months preserved his hide whole, the dead line of fear that his reputation for accurate aim and ruthless action had drawn around him, clearing other men from his vicinity, rendering him immune to pursuit or reprisal. Two days past, near Seco Trail and west of Circle G Ranch, on the open range that lay in the middle of the Seco country, he had killed Lem Strickland. Eight notches for the gun butts now. And wild excitement, fired by fierce indignation, had been sweeping the Seco range ever since.

This was the last straw. The Seco range was "on its ear" from one end to the other. Of all the low-down, dirty, unspeakable acts! Why, Lem and his wife had raised the shooting

fool: had taken him in on the L-Over-S Ranch when he was only a baby, had brought him up in place of the children they had never had, had loved him like their own. Lem had taught him to shoot. Lem had made him a present of the finest horse ever bred on the Seco range, a magnificent Arabian of shimmering brown. Lem and Mrs. Strickland had done everything for him they could have done for their own son. And Kurt had thanked them by shooting Lem down.

Within two hours after Lem had died speedily from the fatal bullet, half the men of the Seco were banded together and started looking for the slayer: they had raked the occupied territory, the open range between, and now had advanced into the mountains to the north of the open range, beating every clump of brush, every grove of trees, every gully and draw, trying to flush Kurt into the open as a hunter and his game dogs flush quarry from cover. And they hadn't found hide nor hair of him. Not a track. Not a camp fire ash. They hadn't yet looked in the right place. They would, eventually, but he wouldn't be there.

The five ranch hands in the Idle Hour, who sounded so much like angry bees buzzing, had been riding with the posse, and had dropped down into Seco Springs for a few hours of rest and a cool drink or two. By noon, they expected to be on their way again toward the mountains to the north. Their intense absorption was consistently ignoring "Swabs," the bartender. He didn't care for that. He wanted also to be heard. He cleared his throat loudly, to attract the attention of the angry men across the bar. They all turned their heads to look at him in scowling inquiry.

Whatever Swabs had intended to say, the words were never spoken. Swabs opened his mouth to give them utterance, but it stayed open, and he merely gulped, his eyes widening, staring out into the hot dusty street before the saloon windows. The five men across the bar whirled to follow his startled gaze. Another ranch hand, astride a big white horse named Skater, had just ridden up to the hitching rack. He dismounted, dropped Skater's reins over a post, and came toward the swinging doors of the Idle Hour like that famous irresistible force looking for an immovable object; in fact, the expression of his face grimly dared any immovable object to get in his way.

"Well, ain't that something?" ejaculated one of the men before the bar. "Bill Stagg, this far from the Circle G! We been wondering why he wasn't with the posse. Can't say as I like his looks any too well."

Swabs nodded concurring opinion, and closed his mouth. His still dilated eyes were fixed on Bill Stagg, as Stagg shoved through the swing doors and strode up to the bar, the sawdust purling from each of his footlifts in a small dry shower. If he had any reputation greater than that of being the best top hand the Circle G ever had known, it was that of being eminently able to discern what constituted his own business, and of attending to it with notable efficiency.

STAGG was a huge man, so huge that he loomed high above the bar as he paused before Swabs; his shoulders were broad, his chest thick, his arms were long and his big hands hard and powerful. He carried himself with a peculiarly graceful assurance that is often common in men who mind their own business so well. His black hair was frosted at the temples. There were a few

wrinkles around his deep-set black eyes. The rest of his face was smooth and young, as if no emotion ever trod there to leave its tracks.

Swabs, and the five ranch hands staring at Stagg, were sharply conscious for the moment of one paramount thought: Bill Stagg was the man who had found Lem Strickland and carried him home to the L-Over-S to die, and nobody had seen Bill Stagg since. He rarely came to Seco Springs; the town of Arroyo, the only other town in the Seco country, was many miles nearer the Circle G. Bill was so seldom seen off the Circle G that a large proportion of the Seco men knew him only by sight or reputation, and some of them didn't know him at all. Nothing short of an event ever brought Stagg clear across the open range to Seco Springs. Nobody in the silent room tried to guess what part of the Seco's latest tragic event had brought him here now. They waited for him to speak. He did, to the bartender.

"Give me a whisky straight, Swabs. About four fingers."

Swabs complied with alacrity. "Sure. Sure! Help yourself!" He shoved a glass and an opened bottle down the bar.

Stagg filled and drained the glass with enviable evidence of his capacity to take it raw, before he spoke again. He set the empty glass down upon the bar without making a sound, and swung his huge graceful body about with the peculiar lightness of perfect muscular coördination, and stood sidewise to the bar, so that he faced both Swabs and the group of ranch hands.

His voice was deep, it rumbled like an organ pipe, but it held an even pitch, and it betrayed no more emotion than his features.

"Boys, I've issued a challenge to Kurt Quillan. Kurt isn't up north of the open range where the posse is hunting for him. I know where he is, and I've sent word that I dare him to meet me here this morning; that I'll be waiting for him, and that I'll drag him feet first from the Idle Hour two minutes after he enters it."

Since it is a natural reaction for one suddenly startled badly to draw a sharp breath, every one of the six men facing Stagg did it. Such a challenge was tantamount to a declaration to commit suicide, and that wasn't exactly their idea of an amusing pastime. Was Bill taking leave of his senses, or was he for the first time in his history on the Seco range overtly concerning himself with another's affairs?

Something in Stagg's black eyes, cold and glittering as flint in the sun, seemed to advance violent negation to both questions. He saw their glances flick toward his waist, and divined their thought, which was a decidedly elemental task. With their attention centered in that direction, they could scarcely have but one thought. Their eyes were on the belts around his waist, gun belts, crossed, shell loops about half filled, a holster on each belt.

Another unprecedented historical event for the Seco: Bill Stagg wearing two belts. Bill was a fair shot, highly accurate, not very fast. So far as any one ever knew he had never shot anything other than coyotes, rattlesnakes, digger squirrels, and such other annoying pests. One gun sufficed. One belt.

But now he wore two belts. Two holsters. Both holsters were empty.

"B'golly," said Swabs, staring at the empty holsters. "Kurt Quillan coming here! You mean that?"

Stagg deliberately filled another glass, emptied it with the same finesse, and replaced the empty glass again on the bar with the same noise-

less motion. The smile that touched the corners of his square strong mouth might have been designated as firm, sinister, mocking, or sad. It was all in the way you saw it.

"Nobody ever caught me fooling yet, Swabs," he answered. "And when he shows up, you boys keep out of it. He'll have a clear path from where he is to the Idle Hour. He isn't going to run into the posse, or anybody else. If he should, he'll know how to keep out of their way. I'm going to tie Skater in the shade. I'll be back in a minute."

He wheeled and walked out of the saloon, leaving both awe and consternation behind him.

Swabs expended his breath in a gust. "I'll believe anything now. You boys want a drink on the house? Better take it while you can get it. And you better get out of here before Kurt shows up, if you want to avoid contracting lead poison."

"I'll take the drink on the house instead," said the same ranch hand who had spoken before. "If any man can take Kurt Quillan, it's Bill Stagg. And if there are going to be any fireworks coming off, I'd sort of like to see the show. It ought to be good. I'm staying. The rest of you fellows can light out if you feel like it."

"No takers," said the fifth man down the bar. "I'm not hankering to stop any man's lead, but I'm fool enough not to want to miss this. If it don't prove worth a little ducking and dodging, I'm a red-eyed bronc that'll never be branded."

CHAPTER II.

RENDEZVOUS.

WITHIN a few moments Stagg had led Skater from the hitching rack around to the shade of the saloon building, and returned to join the five men before the bar, still drinking on the house. The cowboy who had no hankering to stop any man's lead looked at Stagg with a speculative glance.

"How soon are you expecting him, Bill?"

"Well, he's cached in that open triangle between the north line of the Crazy L, and the top of the L I east line. It's about fifty miles from here to there. The fellow who saw him there and came to tell me about it, left the Circle G about the same time I did. He went straight up there, and I had a damn sight farther to ride. He must have passed my message on to Kurt nearly two hours ago. Kurt ought to be here by noon. That Arabian's fast."

Now, the lay of the Seco range was this: The great stretch of open range lay squarely in the center, running north and south. In the north it ended in the Seco Mountains. To the south it widened and spread all over hell's half acre. Both Seco Springs and Arroyo lay to the south of it. West of the open range were two ranches, the Crazy L and the L I, side by side, miles north of Seco Springs. To the east of the open range lay four ranches: the L-Over-S, south of the railroad which ran through Arroyo; the Cross Bar, east of Arroyo; the Circle G, northwest of Arroyo and north of the Cross Bar; and the Seven Up, east of the Circle G. Such was the Seco range.

It covered a lot of territory, but all the men of the country knew it like a book. The five men before the bar, and Swabs behind the bar, could see in their minds' eye the course Quillan would take due south across the Crazy L and the open range below it.

"What was he doing up there?" Swabs wanted to know.

"Playing tag with Lispy Louie, Swabs." Stagg never grinned; had it

been a tendency of his, he would have grinned then at the look on the bartender's face.

"Lispy Louie" le Grande owned the Crazy L. It was a small ranch and he ran it all by himself, but he didn't make a very good job of it. His brand fitted his outfit. Everything about the Crazy L was slightly insane. Louie was small, dark, with oily skin that perpetually shone as if he had just greased it. His eyes were smoky brown and one of them was cocked. He was sly and shrewd, he looked crazy and wasn't, and he was no fit company for a self-respecting cowboy. Swabs sniffed, trying to vision Kurt Quillan coming within a hundred yards of Louie without scaring him out of his greasy skin.

"Well, what did this fellow come and tell you for when he saw Kurt up there?" Swabs was given to asking rash questions.

"Because he was scared right out of his pants, Swabs, and he had to tell somebody, and he knows I never step on worms. Anything else you want to know, Swabs? Don't be bashful, step right up and ask." Was that warning in Stagg's black eyes, or amusement?

Swabs thought it was to be taken at face value as an unusually amiable and talkative streak in Bill Stagg. He leaned on the bar, agog with eagerness.

"Yeah. Who was the fella that told you and went back to tell Kurt what you said?"

Stagg's black eyes bored into Swabs, and for an instant all the men thought he was going to refuse answer. His reply, when it finally came, was harshly curt. "Lispy Louie."

"But—but——" stammered the bartender, over his head entirely. "If he was scared out of his pants even at sight of Kurt, how could you get him to go right up and tell Kurt that——"

Stagg cut him short. "You'll let all your brains run right out of your mouth some day, Swabs. What time is it?"

Swabs subsided, and glanced at the rusty old alarm clock under the bar. "Quarter after ten, Bill. Why?"

"I was just wondering how long I'll have to wait. Noon's the dead line. He won't be later than that."

Stagg missed accurate calculation by just eighteen minutes. At eighteen minutes before twelve Kurt Quillan rode up in a furl of dust, leaped off that finest horse ever bred on the Seco, and stood for a moment motionless, gazing intently through the saloon windows.

The outlaw was a man one would turn to give a second look anywhere —tall, straight, lithe, young. His hair was chestnut-brown and it glowed like fire in the sun. His eyes were long and wide apart, a cold, clean blue. His heavy lashes and brows were black. His features looked as if they had been chiseled out of some sun-browned stone, and by a skillful and fastidious hand. At each corner of his full curved mouth a deep dimple drove into the flesh when he smiled, boring into the high color blending from his cheeks, and when he stopped smiling there was a white spot where each dimple had been, till the color rushed back. The process of that smile held the eye, like it or not, and his big but perfectly set teeth made one think of pearled marble, if there is such a thing. They made one think of it anyway.

But he wasn't smiling now, as he halted there, gazing levelly at the seven men who stood watching him through the saloon windows. His eyes were blue fire. His features were

the color of the paper sacks you get at the store. They couldn't turn white. His skin was too dark, both by nature and from exposure to the elements. He walked slowly across the intervening space between the hitching rack and the swing doors, and from the way he walked one would have felt certain that no matter what he was walking on he wasn't making any noise.

His hands were hanging at his sides. He opened the swing doors by the simple process of stepping forward till his body pressed against them and walked through them. He might have been a tornado, instead of a cat-footed killer, considering the reaction he got. As if blown aside by a violent gale, the five men before the bar swept back to the wall. Swabs stood petrified behind the bar; Bill Stagg stood carelessly leaning upon it.

Quillan moved toward the bar like something propelled gently through the air. There was about him the manner of some pulsing incandescent force, ready to explode into devastating activity at the slightest provoking or rude touch. It couldn't be said that he halted before the bar. He simply reached that position and ceased to move. His full curved mouth showed the big white teeth when he spoke, and though his words held the substance of violence, his voice caressed the air like a muted A string on a guitar.

"Who the hell is Bill Stagg, barswabber? Who is he, and where is he? Tell him I'm here, and that two minutes can be a long time."

Swabs couldn't answer. His eyes bulged from the pressure of fear behind them. His teeth were clenched till they ached. His tongue filled his mouth, dry as cotton. He hadn't even enough control over his optical muscles to swing his gaze to Bill Stagg, though he did make the effort.

Quillan's blue eyes began to lose their fire, to turn cold and clean of all emotion. They moved in an arc from Swabs to the five men drawn along the wall and from the men along the wall to Stagg, still leaning on the bar exactly as he had been, waiting in silence. As Quillan's gaze came to rest on the huge man with the frosted black hair, it stilled. There was no need for him to ask again who or where was Bill Stagg. The answer to that question was quite apparent.

"I've been waiting for you," said Stagg, and the timbre of his deep voice might have indicated laconic reply, or curiosity, or some indescribable degree of pity—which wouldn't seem according to the cards; pity for Kurt Quillan! "You made good time. That Arabian must do about a mile in a minute flat if you shove him. Step up and I'll buy you a drink."

IF the incandescent force which was the essence of Kurt Quillan had been quiescent before, it was hushed now. Of all the situations he had estimated that he might find when he should confront Bill Stagg in the Idle Hour, he had never even remotely visioned this. A man must judge by his own standards of conduct, and he knew the potential devastation that hung by a hair trigger within himself when he faced a man as softly as Bill Stagg was facing him. In that instant Kurt Quillan came as close to fear as he had ever come in his life.

The sensation was as unwelcome as it was uncomfortable. Some intangible aura about him seemed to quiver. The fire burned high in his still eyes, blurring the clean cold blue.

"If you want a drink, you'd better get it quick. It may be your last, and you haven't much time. I don't drink—with fools."

Without a lowered glance, without a designating syllable, he referred clearly to the empty holsters Stagg wore.

"Nice of you." Stagg turned his gaze upon the bartender without moving his head. "Make it two whiskies, Swabs. Kurt always drinks with an old friend."

Swabs felt himself shivering again, but he didn't even try to stop it now. He knew he couldn't. Every moment the explosion of that quivering force pent in the outlaw was hovering nearer its detonation. Then Swabs's brain managed to do a little work on its own initiative without any impulsion from him. An old friend. Was that really what Stagg had said? Goofy! Why, Quillan hadn't even known who Bill Stagg was! Swabs's brain kept right on working now, though he was trying hard to make it stop; the conclusions it was drawing were frightening, and he was badly enough frightened already.

He dared a covert glance at the taut-bodied ranch hands drawn along the wall, and found that his eyes would really move. He found, too, that they were stumbling over the same obvious consideration that had started his obstinate brain functioning.

Bill Stagg. Kurt Quillan. Strangers to each other. An old friend. An old friend? An old score, that was the word. Some ancient call to redress, reaching back through the years. And Kurt Quillan was ignorant of it. This was nitroglycerin, and Bill Stagg held the detonating cap.

Swabs filled two glasses with whisky, and his fingers shook till the bottle clinked against the glasses' rims, then he dropped the bottle, and snatched at the neck to keep it from turning over, and wiped the sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand. Neither Stagg nor Quillan looked at him. They looked at each other. Huge man with frosted black hair, and tall, lithe man with chestnut hair: black eyes, hard and cold, and blue eyes, blurred by fire, waiting.

Stagg picked up the glasses, he raised himself from his leaning position, drew his huge body erect, and advanced till he was within two feet of the outlaw. He offered Quillan the full glass in his left hand. The pulsing force blazed to life.

With his wild lightning draw, Quillan cleared his right-hand gun of its holster, crashing the glass from Stagg's hand, spattering the whisky over both of them. Swabs swayed and closed his eyes, setting his sick nerves for the blast that must surely follow. But no report of gunfire assaulted the aching silence of the room.

Stagg's huge hand, quite as swift as the slashing weapon, spurting blood from several cuts the shattered whisky glass had made, clenched into a fist and swung upward in a vicious arc that ended on the right side of Quillan's chin. The crack of the blow sounded like the popping of a frozen stick.

The quivering force went out so quickly that it was almost as if some one had turned off a light that was uncomfortably hot. Kurt's gun dropped into the sawdust. Kurt toppled and went over onto his back beside the gun, out cold, his jaw broken.

A painfully released sigh breathed from the five men along the wall, like a faint breeze.

Stagg raised the glass in his right

hand and drained it, exactly as he had drained it before. Not a drop of whisky had spilled. He set the empty glass back upon the bar without making a sound. He tilted his head and looked at Kurt Quillan. He moved as if there were no one in the room but himself and the senseless outlaw whose chestnut head lay in the sawdust. The presence of others being largely an acceptance of one's own awareness, there were right then no others in the room but Stagg and Quillan—to Stagg.

HE bent over Kurt. He picked up the gun in the sawdust, and took the other from Kurt's belt. He thrust them both into the empty holsters on his own belts, which had been waiting for them.

With one almost effortless heave and swing of his long arms and big hard hands, he lifted Kurt's inert body to his shoulder. He got no farther.

The street outside fogged with dust boiling from sliding hoofs; a dozen horses came to a milling stop at the hitching rack. Men thudded to the ground, and came racing into the Idle Hour. The ranchers' posse, with Pete Gulick at its head.

Pete Gulick was the little fat Dutchman who owned the Circle G. He was German, but the Seco called him a little fat Dutchman. His face was round, his head was tow, and he had a round fat little belly. His language was a sort of polyglot of broken English, guttural idioms, German ejaculations and incongruous slang. But he wasn't a comical figure. In spite of his plump stature and excitable ways, there was always about him an indefinable dignity. No man was better liked on the Seco. He was observant of eye and quick of perception; he grasped the entire significance of the scene as he halted short, the posse crowding at his shoulders, and saw his own top hand standing there with the outlaw's limp body held firmly by his raised left arm.

"Vait a minute, Bill!" Gulick commanded. "Ve cut Kurt's trail, und ve followed him in. Ve got bizness mit dot son uf a gun."

Stagg's deep bass muted to a smooth consonance. "Sorry I can't oblige, boss. I'm taking care of Kurt Quillan personally. You can mark this down in your little book: Kurt's killing days are over. What I'm going to do with him is my own damned business, in case you don't know me well enough to realize it. And I'm warning every man on the Seco range to keep his hands off unless he wants to get hurt. You all back over here along the wall by the other boys. I can use one of these guns of Kurt's if I have to. I'd rather not."

Gulick lifted a plump hand and gestured his men toward the wall. "Vell, don't you heard vot he said? Get out of his vay, yet!"

They moved almost as quickly aside as the other men had moved when Quillan entered the room. Stagg bent a queer smile on the fat little Dutchman. "Thanks, boss. Don't let any of them get out of hand, because I'll take a shot at a man for the first time, if anybody tries to stop me. I won't miss. What time is it, Swabs?"

"Four—fourteen minutes of twelve. Why?"

"Not bad calculating." Stagg gripped Kurt's body a little more tightly, and bent to pick up the outlaw's blue beaver hat lying on the floor. "I said I'd drag him out of here feet first two minutes after he came in. Four it is. However, seing that I have my hands full, and

he's banged up a little, I'll just carry him out feet first."

He turned and walked toward the swing doors, Kurt's limp legs thrusting out before him, and against his broad back, as he moved into the band of sunlight streaming through the windows, Kurt's chestnut hair glinted like fire, and three little flecks of sawdust fell from it, burning yellow for an instant in the hot sunlight as they drifted to the floor. The swing doors closed with a slight rasp.

Swabs slumped against the bar, and the color began to return to his face. All along the wall the posse men started to galvanize into action. Before they had advanced three feet the little Dutchman barked at them.

"Cut dot out! Don't you heard vot he told you? All you boys stay right vere you are, yet. Bill Stagg knows vot he's doing, und you let him alone. You don't tink he pulled dot chust to be doing some monkey bizness, do you? *Nein!* Not Bill Stagg. I never did tink Bill Stagg comes to der Seco range chust to make vun more goot cowhand for de Circle Gee. Now I know it. And you punks stay put right vere you are or I raise hell mit you!"

No one answered him, verbally, that is. The men drew into a group behind him, watching through the saloon windows while Stagg lifted Kurt's limp body to the back of the brown Arabian and tied him into the saddle with his own lariat, in such a manner that the outlaw could ride comfortably yet would be rendered helpless to make any attempt at escape when he should return to consciousness. Then Stagg brought big white Skater around, vaulted into his own saddle, and departed down the dusty road, leading the brown Arabian.

"These quiet ones are dangerous," sighed Swabs. "I guess it wasn't any use trying to stop Bill Stagg."

"I don't vant to stop him ven I get a goot look in his face vonce," said Pete Gulick bluntly, hitching his chaps belt up around his fat little belly. "Ve don't go messing mit Bill Stagg's bizness. Ve go home now, und ve keep quiet till ve see vot Bill's going to do. You punks tell everybody dot Bill's got Kurt, und to keep hands off till ye find out vot's up. Come on mit you!"

And the little fat Dutchman stamped out of the Idle Hour, wondering just where his top hand was going to take Kurt Quillan.

CHAPTER III.

A FOOL FOR BLUE.

PETE GULICK was ignorant of the fact that Kurt's jaw was broken, or he would have known exactly where Stagg was bound with his prisoner. Stagg knew the jaw was broken. He had felt the bone give under his knuckles. He had heard it crack. Given that knowledge, there was only one possible immediate destination. He was bound for the home of Doctor Mordan, in Arroyo. Arroyo lay forty miles east of Seco Springs, more east than north, by far.

That is, the distance to Arroyo was only forty miles if a man took a course across country. By the road one traveled a good sixty miles in the journey. After getting into the hills, the going was retarding to a man's pace by either route, and Stagg knew that fast traveling was out of the question. A man taking a fast pace and going by the road could arrive in Arroyo ahead of a man traveling slowly across country. But Stagg could not choose his pace. He was forced to ride slowly on account of the injured gunman, so he

was compelled to take the route across country.

Before the two men had left Seco Springs a mile behind, Quillan had regained consciousness, to find himself in a great deal of pain, of which fact he did not leave Stagg long in ignorance. He straightened in the saddle, took stock of his situation, and his voice rose in an even flow of malignant curses, from which he very shortly subsided to silence, simply because any attempt to speak caused him too acute misery.

Stagg turned in the saddle to glance back at him, and again there was in his deep tones that something which might have been an elusive kind of pity.

"Every word you speak is only making your jaw hurt worse, Kurt. I know that the jar of riding makes it pretty tough for you, even as slow as we're going, but shut up and take it with the best grace you can! I didn't mean to break your jaw. I hit harder than I intended to, because I didn't want any gun play, and I had to be sure to knock you out. I'm getting you as fast as I can to Doc Mordan." Kurt's face was swelling and turning black. Stagg didn't like that. As soon as they reached Seco Springs Creek, he thought, he would see what cold water would do. It ought to keep the swelling down and ease the pain some.

Quillan attempted no answer. He was too badly ridden by pain to give much consideration to anything but the desire for relief. He had never been badly hurt before. Intense pain was a new thing to him. He had never been thrown by an obstreperous broncho hard enough to be more than slightly bruised. He had never been really sick of any disease. No man's bullet had ever even so much as scored his flesh. But he knew pain now, and he was dizzy from the effects of it. His head was one solid unceasing ache. His face had begun to feel hot and stiff. He was unpleasantly sick at his stomach. The sun was blistering his shoulders and back, the relentless heat of its direct rays doubled his misery, and the two men could take little advantage of passing areas of shade.

That pent incandescent force was no less potent in him; it was merely insulated by the dull coating of his misery.

At Seco Springs Creek Stagg called a halt, soaked his neckerchief in the icy mountain stream, and tried to alleviate the outlaw's pain with the cold water application. Kurt only groaned a curse and turned his head away; and Stagg decided that any alleviating measures possible to him were too crude and too few, his ignorance of broken jaws too profound, for any waste of time to be condoned. His one expedient was to get Quillan to the doctor with all possible speed. So he set all his thoughts and effort to that course.

Dusk had fallen by the time the two men came at last to Arroyo. Stagg himself was weary, and Quillan was stupid and groggy with fever.

The dusk had deepened to early night when Stagg at last brought the two horses to a halt discreetly in Mordan's back yard. The yard, under the spreading shade trees, was only a pool of shadow. No answer came to Stagg's knock. Mordan was not at home. Stagg untied the helpless Kurt, lifted him from the saddle, and carried him into Mordan's living-room office. He was forced to feel his way carefully into the doctor's bedroom, locate the bed and shove a chair out of the way with his foot, before he could lay Quillan down.

He groped for a lamp, lighted it, and carried it to the small round

table at the head of the bed. He removed Quillan's black leather chaps, his belts and his boots, and heaped them on the floor at the foot of the bed, lifting Quillan's feet onto the bed and straightening his body. He laid the blue beaver hat on the bureau. Quillan's eyes were closed, and he was groaning faintly in pain. Stagg, wondering just what to do next, went out into Mordan's front room, which was living room and office and reception room all three, lighted another lamp, and looked about for something that would apprise him of Mordan's whereabouts.

The doctor usually left word there when he was called away, giving information as to his destination and the expected hour of his return, for the benefit of any one who might need to get in touch with him. When Stagg swung open the front door, he found what he sought, held to the outside of the front door by a carpet tack.

Stagg drew the door back till the lamplight fell upon the note scrawled in Mordan's fine precise handwriting. It said briefly:

Back at seven thirty,
MORDAN.

STAGG looked across at the doctor's desk clock as he closed the door, leaving the note where it was. The hour was nine-fifteen. Mordan had intended to return before dark. Evidently he'd been delayed, which was no new thing for the doctor. The note made no mention of his place of call, so there was no way of telling where to look for him. Stagg went back to the room where Quillan lay, his anxiety increasing with every passing moment. The gunman had not moved, nor had his half delirious attempts at muttering ceased.

Stagg frowned uneasily, walked into the front room again, and stood staring at the door, wondering if he should take a chance on trying to locate Mordan.

Then he heard the doctor's buckboard draw up before the front yard, and he heaved a sigh of relief as he hurried to swing back the outer door to allow the lamp's glow to fall on the sidewalk leading from the road, and light the doctor in.

Mordan was a slim man, very tall, but stooped from the shouldering of the years and the demands of his profession. His hair was gray, his eyes were gray, and the cropped mustache on his lip was nearly white. He was a man of delicacy and gentleness, which he tried to hide under bluff tones and harsh words that did not at all make the concealment he expected of them. He came into sight of the man in the doorway now, and Stagg's black eyes widened a little in surprise.

Mordan advanced into the lamplight, along his sidewalk, carrying a suitcase in one hand, and with the other hand guiding a slender young woman over the moss-grown flagging. The doctor peered into the house as he came up the steps, wondering who was in need of him now, and smiled a quick welcome as he recognized Stagg.

"Oh, it's Bill! How are you, boy? Somebody sick over at the Circle G? Sorry to keep you waiting. But I went to the station to meet my niece, and the damned train was nearly two hours late. It was due at seven fifteen. Never is on time. Makes me tired. This is my niece, Rosanna Blue, never called anything but Micky." Mordan set the suitcase down and closed the front door.

"Micky, this is Bill Stagg, one of the best boys we've got out here."

"Micky" was tall for a girl, but she

was compelled to look up to Bill's height. She gave him a quick inclusive glance, and she liked what she saw, and smiled. She was blond, and white-skinned, and her eyes were the color of amber. She extended a slim hand, with impulsive friendliness.

"You should say 'welcome home,' Bill. I'm not merely here for a vacation. My mother died, and I've come to live with Uncle Dan."

"Oh!" Some of Stagg's weariness and anxiety stilled, his natural male instinct toward the admiration of gentle womanhood arrested at the mere sight of Micky Blue, and he gripped her cool hand in his big fingers, smiling in return. "Then I'll say it. Welcome home, Micky. Excuse me if I turn to business, will you?"

He released her hand with the same muscular coördination that had set the whisky glass on the bar without a sound, and swerved his gaze to Mordan. "No, nobody's sick on the Circle G, doc. But you'd better go into the bedroom and see what you can do for Kurt Quillan. I'm afraid he's in a bad way. I knocked him down and broke his jaw."

Mordan's long thin frame started. "Kurt Quillan! Humphf! Why didn't you break his neck?"

"I have use for him, or maybe I would have. I didn't do it purposely. I only meant to knock him out. His face is swelling, turning black, he's pretty hot with fever. It happened over nine hours ago. Don't let him die, will you?"

Mordan's gray brows ridged over his slate-gray eyes in a frown. As Swabs and the ranch hands in the Idle Hour had done, he sensed some personal equation existent between Quillan and Stagg. He heard it in the tone of Stagg's voice, he saw it in the depths of Stagg's black eyes. He did not make articulate his thoughts. He had learned forty years ago that a doctor must only too often work in the dark and refrain from asking questions. He began removing his coat and vest quickly.

"No, I won't let him die. A man doesn't often die of a broken jaw, Bill. Get a hot fire in the stove, Bill, as quickly as you can. Micky, you take off your hat and jacket and put on that rubber apron hanging yonder. Get some water to heat in that white enamel pan you'll find in the kitchen by the sink; fill it clear up. See those instruments in the second tray in the cabinet? Get them to boiling for me as quickly as possible. There may be some bone splinters to remove. Bring in that tray with the tape and gauze on it when you come. Move fast, now; both of you. I'm going in to look at Kurt."

He found the gunman quite stupid with the fever that had claimed him, and easily manageable. There were but two bone splinters to remove. While Mordan was working on the injured jaw, Micky stood quietly by, ready with whatever assistance she might be able to give. Stagg stood across the bed, huge and still, looking down at Kurt. He spoke to the doctor without raising his gaze.

"I'll tell you what I told the boss, and the boys in the Idle Hour, doc. Kurt's killing days are over. I'm taking charge of him from now on. The reason back of that action is something I don't care to talk about. I haven't anything more to say."

Mordan lifted his penetrating gray eyes, as he laid the second bone splinter in a small enamel tray. "I guess that's enough, Bill. My curiosity always has been healthy, but reasonably obedient to my dictates." His gaze shifted to his niece. "Pretty rough on you, to drop right into things like this, Micky, but I knew you'd rather be in on the job than

stand around doing nothing. This is a kind of special case, you know; a kind of special patient." His light dry voice took on a sardonic tinge. "You remember on the way over from the station I told you we had a real gunman running loose over the Seco? Well, Quillan is it."

"Oh, yes? The fellow who just killed the foster father who had brought him up?" Micky's eyes dropped to Quillan's discolored face, in quick new interest. "I begin to understand the veiled remarks passing between you and Bill, now. So, that's your gunman and outlaw! He looks like something out of a romantic lady's dreams. I suppose there really is no danger of his dying?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Mordan dryly. "He's pretty sick from the injury, his fever's pretty high; but that was aggravated by his riding so far in the hot sun without anything being done for him. But there was no way of evading that. I'm the only doctor on the Seco, and Bill got him here as quickly as it could have been done with consideration for the fellow's injury. Quillan will be all right. He'll have a few days of hurting, though. Nasty fracture. You come around here and hold his hand for me, Bill, so he can't move suddenly and break the needle. I'm going to give him another shot before I go on. Have to set the jaw, and wire those teeth. It's going to be bad if he comes out of his stupor."

IN spite of the alleviating influence of the hypodermic injection, the severe pain jerked Kurt to consciousness, and he stared up at Mordan, wild agony clouding that clean cold blue of his eyes. The blue eyes moved to Stagg, who had come around the end of the bed to assist with the hypodermic, and was still standing there by the doctor. Stagg leaned over the bed, and laid one big hand on Quillan's shoulder in a tight commanding grip.

"Take it easy, Kurt. The doctor is going to be through with this business in a few minutes now."

Mordan's probing gaze flicked over Stagg's face, curious, calculating, but he spoke to his niece. "Get me that can of ether on that shelf, Micky. We'll have to put him to sleep. No, that bigger can to the right. That's it. Thanks. And the pad of cotton. Now, Kurt, you breathe deep. This will put you out so you won't feel a thing, and when you wake up it will be all over. Come on, now. Breathe it in."

Quillan, objecting much more to the pain than he did to the thought of the anæsthetic, obeyed, strangled a little over the ether, lifted a groping hand, and relaxed, flaccid, into unconsciousness again. Mordan worked rapidly, while Micky administered the ether, and Stagg looked on silent and absorbed by his thoughts.

Within a short time the job was done, the teeth and bone held in place by silver wire, the broken jaw bandaged, and all evidence of the messy task removed. With a medicine dropper, the doctor dripped into the unconscious man's mouth a palliative for the fever, turned down the light, and motioned Stagg and Micky into the other room.

A smile of approval lighted Mordan's thin face, as he gazed at his niece, rolled down his sleeves and lounged into a chair. "I must commend your adaptability, Micky. You stood up to it like a veteran. I wouldn't have been surprised at you if you'd fainted on me there when it got mussy. But you worked right through the job as if you'd been trained to it."

"I have been trained to it, Uncle Dan. I've been working in a doctor's office for three years. I'm used to things like that." The girl's gaze, speculative, veiled, provocative with a slight cast of hostility, turned to brood on Stagg's face. "I think that easing the suffering of others is about as noble a work as any one can choose, whether the people you doctor are good or bad. That's why I chose it. Only—it has always seemed so inconsistent, so futile, to me, to minister to a man, to heal his injuries, merely so that he can recover and you can hang him."

Stagg rose to the challenge in words and tone. "Nobody's going to hang him." His gaze brooded, also, on the delicate contours of her face made golden by the lamplight, on the clean curve of her throat, on the shimmering silver lights that followed the waves and troughs in her pale blond hair. "That's why I barged in and took command of this situation myself. I knew the boys would hang him if I didn't stop them. And—how is a man going to square things that have gotten all twisted up if you simply break his neck and stick him under the dirt? That's another brand of inconsistency, if you ask me."

"Seventeen years is a long time," said the doctor, but he did not look at Bill Stagg, and he seemed to be insinuating that somebody had already had seventeen years to square something that had gotten all twisted up and hadn't done a very good job of it.

"Not long enough for some people to forget in," replied Bill Stagg. "Don't begin guessing, doc. Because you're sure to guess wrong. And there are some things that nobody knows. I'm on their trail. I'm not talking about them yet. Perhaps I never will do any talking about them—and then, again, maybe I will. It all depends on what I can dig up, and I haven't found the places to dig yet. How long do you think Kurt will have to stay here before I can take him away?"

"I couldn't say definitely, Bill. If everything goes as it should, he'll probably be cursing you between his teeth to-morrow morning. The fever will likely be gone in a day or two. Oh, I expect you'll be able to take him along in less than a week. Get all the liquid nourishment down him that you can until I dare remove those wires so he can open his jaws." The doctor's gaze abruptly shifted to Micky's face. "What's the matter, Micky? You've a queer look in your eyes."

The wide eyes, so like dark unsmoky amber, fixed on the doctor's thin wind-seamed visage. "I was thinking of that man in there on your bed, Uncle Dan; of the queer things you and Bill are saying, of the terrible things Kurt Quillan has done. There is something about him that is—oh, I don't know—sad is the word, I guess. He's very handsome, isn't he?"

"Handsome?" Mordan's thin frame roused in his chair. "Yes, he's a handsome devil all right, if you like them hard-grained and ruthless. But don't you go getting any romantic ideas about that fellow, Miss Micky. He's a killer, and a low one. There's nothing in him to admire. He's bad clean through."

MICKY shook her head, the brooding look still in her amber gaze. "No. He is not bad clean through, Uncle Dan. You're exaggerating the extent of his degeneration, intentionally, perhaps. He is only partly bad. Maybe he'd never have been bad at all, if he'd

had his way about it, Doctor Mordan."

"I wonder if you could be right about that?" Was that hope in Bill Stagg's face? Was that the look of a man drowning and catching at a straw? "He's bad. He's lower than a snake's belly. I wouldn't be guilty of pulling any sob stuff in defense of Kurt Quillan. But—you know that saying about people being great? I suppose you could twist it to apply to people being bad, too, like this: some people are born killers, some achieve the status of killers, and some have killing thrust upon them. I wish I could believe that Kurt had killing thrust upon him. Don't ask me why. It's a long story. But I'm promising you and the doctor that Kurt will never go blood-spilling again if I can help it. And if I can't help it, I'll kill him myself. And I never shot at a man yet."

"Bill." Mordan drew his thin body erect, and the expression on his lined face was not curiosity; it was intense interest born of concern. "How did you know where Kurt was, and how did you manage to get hold of him?"

Stagg told him, concisely and completely, and Mordan nodded. "I see. But, if Louie was scared out of his pants, as you told the boys in Seco Springs, how did you persuade him to go close enough to Kurt Quillan to speak to him?"

"Do you like Lispy Louie, doc?"

"No! How could I?"

"How many other people feel the same way?"

"Everybody that ever knew him, I guess."

"You're likely right, doc. Do you suppose Louie knows it?"

"He'd have to know it, Bill. Say, what the devil are you getting at?"

"Well, doc, I don't like him either. But there's some damn fool thing in me that is sorry for the misfits and the incompetents. I have to be kind to them. I go out of my way to be kind to them. As you plant flowers. And Lispy has got the idea that I like him. I wouldn't disabuse his mind of the error for money. So, who would he go to, when he was scared pink and wanted help?"

"I see. And he managed the courage to go up and speak to Kurt for the same reason. But Kurt is a natural woodsman. It would be practically impossible to take him by surprise in the woods. I can't understand how he ever exposed himself long enough for Louie to get sight of him and know he was there. Freakish train of circumstances, Bill. If Louie hadn't got sight of Kurt by some strange chance, he wouldn't have been frightened, he wouldn't have come to you, you wouldn't have known where Kurt was so that you could dare him into your trap, and the posse would have eventually found him, and he'd be a dead man by now. I'd give a lot to know how he made the error of letting Lispy Louie get sight of him."

"So would I, but I'm not going to ask him." Stagg rose to his feet, stretching to his astounding height. "Well, I guess I'll run along. I'll stay over at Stokes's till Kurt's well enough to travel again. I'm certainly glad you came here, Micky. Rain in the desert. I'll be back in the morning to see how Kurt is. Good night."

Micky sat very still for a long moment, gazing at the door which closed after Stagg as he went out, and neither she nor the doctor spoke till the big man's footsteps had died away in the night. Then the girl turned her gaze upon her uncle, to see that he was watching her with a quizzical smile.

"People—people!" she said somberly. "How they hurt, how they hope, and what strange and frenzied things they do! You and Bill have roused my curiosity. I'm ready to give a good deal, too, to learn whatever gave your Lispy Louie a chance to know that Quillan was in his neighborhood. Tell me more about this business, Uncle Dan. Who is Lispy Louie?"

The doctor told her. He described Louie and his Crazy L Ranch with the terse directness that doctors learn to employ. When he had finished, she nodded, and smiled.

"Does he lisp, really?"

"Badly."

"Queer little man, isn't he? What strange undercurrents are here, Uncle Dan? Why are you so astounded at Bill Stagg's taking possession of Quillan as he has already done?"

Mordan scowled and shook his head, not in negation, but as a man does who strives to clear his senses. "I don't really know, Micky. There's something queer in it, and no mistake. Seventeen years ago Lem Strickland found Kurt's mother, Bess Quillan, dead in Lobo Pass. Shot twice, once through the head. Lobo Pass is northeast of here, about ninety miles, beyond the Seven Up Ranch. Kurt was then about four years old, as near as Lem could guess, and he was huddled by his mother's body, crying. Lem took the dead woman to his ranch, and buried her. He kept the boy and brought him up. He was single then. He married Mrs. Strickland about five years after he brought the boy from Lobo Pass. That's all any one ever has known about it."

"Did Bill Stagg know Strickland well?"

"Only slightly, as one of the Seco ranchers. I know that. And you heard Bill himself admit that Kurt didn't know Bill from Adam's off ox. You know as much about the strange undercurrents as I do, Micky, because now you know all that I know about the whole business. Well, you'd better get to bed, young lady. You've had a long ride and you must be tired. Come on and I'll show you to the room I got ready for you. I'll sit up a while and watch Kurt. He's in my bed."

MICKY voiced a prompt remonstrance. "I'm not tired, Uncle Dan. You're the one who's tired. And you haven't any intention of just watching Quillan for a little while, either. You mean to stay up all night, and you know it. A broken jaw isn't enough to lay a man flat for long, and Quillan is a killer, and you're appointing yourself jailer and guard. You aren't going to chance his getting up and making an escape."

Mordan laughed. "Check! What of it?"

"You're the one who's tired, I said. That's what of it. You go to bed in my room and get some sleep now while he's groggy from fever and the ether. I'll sit up and watch. I've done aplenty of night watching by patients. If he shows the least sign of returning consciousness, I'll call you. That's a promise."

"All right," Mordan agreed. "If you're not sleepy. I'll admit that I am pretty tired. I had a couple of hard cases to-day. But before I go to bed I'll just tie Kurt's hands and feet so he can't do any damage if he does wake up. I wouldn't trust that snake not to kill his own grandmother. And, although I can't see what good he'd be to anybody, if Bill wants him, he's going to be right

here waiting when Bill comes to get him."

So the doctor tied Kurt Quillan into his bed, hand and foot, placing the unconscious man in no discomfort, but binding him so efficiently that he couldn't even rise to a sitting position when he did return to consciousness. Then Mordan went to seek a little rest, leaving the girl sitting near the outlaw's bedside, with a magazine in her lap. But she did not then read anything in the magazine. Nurses are interested in their patients, even if the patients don't always think so. And this was a patient whose kind was new to her experience.

Yet all her speculation and wondering concerning him were set at naught. He was only an unconscious form lying on a bed, his cold blue eyes closed, his chestnut hair burning in one spot where the lamplight touched it, his pent and vibrant force curtained from her by the veil of fever and anæsthesia that drifted foglike between her an his alert brain, his swift and facile intelligence.

She wondered what dark and devious trail twisted back into the years, to that shrouded night in Lobo Pass, where Lem Strickland had found a dead woman and a terrorized child; and where that trail would lead from here on. She wondered, too, if there might not be a better and brighter trail for him if some one could turn his feet toward it. Men as hardened and sinister as Kurt Quillan did sometimes turn to better and brighter ways, if they were not already warped in the molding. She believed that, simply because she liked to believe in the basic goodness of men. She liked to believe in redemption, though she knew of those two ways, atonement or death, and she knew that it sometimes took both of them to accomplish the redemption.

She found herself wishing that he would waken, and look at her, that she might glimpse something of the spirit that dwelt in the recumbent and inert figure. She noted rather sharply the blue beaver hat, the blue shirt, the dark blue wool trousers. And suddenly he opened his eyes, and gazed straight into her face, and she spoke the thought that was in her mind.

"You like blue, don't you?"

He was conscious of his dizziness more than his pain. He was fully aware of her presence for the first time. Only those who have reacted from anæsthesia and pain can know how he felt. And he answered without stopping to weigh his utterance, speaking the truth.

"I do. I don't care what color anything is so long as it's blue. I'm a fool for blue. If I weren't, I wouldn't be here with a broken jaw."

She ignored whatever cryptic reason lay behind that statement. She rose and stepped to the head of the bed. "Just lie perfectly quiet, please. If you move about you're liable to make yourself sick. We want to avoid that. It would be frightfully unpleasant for you. You haven't eaten anything for nine hours, and that is going to help a great deal."

He muttered painfully, through his closed teeth. "I haven't eaten for over twenty hours. Are you a nurse?"

"Yes. I'm Doctor Mordan's niece."

"What's the matter with my mouth? I can't open it."

"No. Your jaws are wired shut. So the bone can knit properly. Don't try to talk any more."

"O. K. I'll just lie here and look at you." He glanced down at the

ropes that bound him, and a twisted leer of a smile lifted the corner of his mouth opposite the broken jaw. "Any objection to that?"

She felt then the first reaction of the force that burned within him. It quivered behind his surface air of dearly-bought nonchalance, in the eyes of cold clean blue that she saw opened wide for the first time. She answered slowly:

"None. I don't believe that will hurt you. It never has hurt any of my patients yet. I'll tell you about your jaw, if you care to know."

"Go ahead." So she told him all there was to tell, and when she had finished, he smiled. On the side of his mouth opposite the bandage the one visible dimple drove the color away, and left the little white spot for an instant where the dimple had been.

She said almost sharply: "What were you doing to let that Lispy Louie get sight of you so that he could tell any one where you were?"

He had closed his eyes. At that question he opened them, and their cold blue gaze centered on her face. "I was picking violets."

The tone was mocking, so insolent that it was almost an insult, and she shrank and straightened in the same movement. She said curtly: "Don't talk any more. I'll give you some water if you want it. You may have a little if you don't feel nauseated."

"No, thanks. I don't feel sick, but I don't want any water. I'll just lie here and look at you." But the cold blue eyes closed, and unconsciousness claimed him yet again.

At midnight, he roused again, and though he knew she was there he made no attempt to address her. She drowsed in her chair, and at a little after dawn Mordan found them there, both asleep. He wakened the girl and commanded tersely that she go to bed and rest. She rose from her chair, stiffly, stretching her cramped muscles, and followed the doctor into the office living room.

"Uncle Dan," she asked, nudged both by a formless indignation and by curiosity, "if you asked any of these men out here about something and he said he'd been picking violets, what would you gather that he meant?"

Mordan smiled thinly. "It's not an uncommon phrase with these boys out here, my dear. They'd be telling you mildly to mind your own business. Go to bed, will you?"

To be continued in next week's issue.

BULLION BAIT

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Author of "Bullets For Gold," etc.

HE sat at the desk in his stage office, at the end of another bitter week, checking through a huge pile of waybills. He wore a black broadcloth suit, trousers outside his boots, and a wide-brimmed, low-crowned California hat set on the back of his head. He was young, tall, square-shouldered, big with a smoothly proportionate build that didn't look big. He had a stubborn jaw and a rugged face stamped with reckless energy. His name was Hugh Dolan and, at the age of twenty-four, he was already sole owner of the Dolan Stage & Express Co.

He checked the bills impatiently, pausing often to gaze out the window at the bleak mining town, perched here on the high, barren mountain, swept now with raw wind and swirling dust. His mind kept returning to this most recent bullion theft, to the realization that the Condor Mine would not long stand for such losses. And to lose the Condor business, he told himself, would mean his finish.

He completed the bills finally, was about to go out for supper, when the door opened and Sid Tranter came in. Looking up from the desk, Hugh's gaze was instantly guarded, faintly hostile. He said:

"Hello, Tranter. Want something?"

"Yep," Tranter replied. He sat down in a chair, tipped back against the wall, thrust the thumb of his left hand in the armpit of his checkered vest. With his right hand he removed a long black cigar from his mouth, waved it half around the room in an inclusive gesture.

"The Dolan Stage & Express Co.," he said. "That's what I want."

"You waste a lot of breath," Hugh remarked.

"Wasting considerable yourself if you ask me," Tranter returned. "I've already taken over half your business."

Hugh made a chopping motion with his hand. "By undercutting every fair price I make. You're taking a loss on everything you haul."

"But only until I make you quit," Tranter amplified. "Then my prices jump sky-high and I make it all back and plenty to boot."

"I've still got the Condor shipments," Hugh said. "As long as I'm carrying their bullion I make money."

Tranter smiled blandly. "You lost another shipment for them last week. How long you think they'll stand for that?"

"When you handle bullion you got to expect stick-ups." Hugh shrugged. "You've had a few on your own line."

"Yes," Tranter said, "and it's given me an idea."

Hugh glanced up sharply.

Tranter grinned. "I'm not telling you what that idea is. It's just something for you to figure on. But sure as I'm sitting here, Hugh, I'm going to take you over. Just because I'm big-hearted I'm giving you one more chance to sell out. I'll give you three thousand dollars for your outfit, stock, equipment and good will. On condition that you leave town and not come back. That's my final offer."

Hugh looked at him and laughed.

Tranter's face clouded. "I tell you there's room here for one stage company, and one only! Either you or me has got to get out!"

"That's right," Hugh agreed. "Well, so long, Sid. Glad to have known you."

Tranter glared at him. He stood up abruptly and walked to the door. He paused and stared back. "I'm done with making medicine with you," he stated. "From now on it's war—war to a finish."

"Same to you," Hugh said. "And many of them."

ON a winter morning, two years past, Hugh Dolan had set out from this camp on snowshoes carrying a package of letters, fought his way through the worst blizzard in years taking those letters to the outside world, and three weeks later returned with mail and a few supplies. For this service each of the miners involved paid him a small fee. A month later he was trailing to and from the camp with three laden mules, and at the end of six months running a regular pack-train service. As the mines developed, and a road of sorts was built, the demand for transportation increased, to bring in mine timbers, machinery, building materials, merchandise, to freight out ore, and later, with the establishment of the first stamp mill, to carry bullion. In a dogged effort to keep pace with the growing camp, Hugh spent every cent he made, and as much as he could borrow, on equipment, on horses, mules, half a dozen freight wagons, and eventually two speedy Concord stages.

That was the way transportation

in the West was made, and from such individual beginnings were spawned the great companies that lustily spanned a continent—Russel, Majors & Waddell, Wells Fargo, the far-flung Butterfield enterprises—stemmed from efforts of a single man, his nerve and his daring and his endless dogged tenacity.

In this camp, Hugh pioneered the way, made the business, and then Sid Tranter stepped in. The feud between them had been inevitable, and Hugh was glad that it had at last taken the form of open avowal. The show-down was already overdue, and the sooner it was settled, one way or the other, the better.

In himself, without conceit, Hugh had a complete confidence. That was a decided asset in his business, but not, as he discovered when he called on Drusilla Shelton the following evening, so dependable in matters of the heart. Drusilla was a dainty, dark-eyed girl, with a pert, lovely face and quick, teasing laughter, the daughter of old Matt Shelton, widowed manager of the Condor Mine. Hugh thought she was the loveliest girl he had ever set eyes on. He'd been keeping steady company with her for over a year, and accepted their eventual marriage as a matter of course. Sitting there talking with her in the cozy cabin this evening, after old Matt had been called back to the mine, he brought up the matter bluntly.

"Drusilla," he said, "I been thinking. There's no sense to putting it off any longer. Let's have the wedding right away, in the next week or so."

Drusilla glanced up swiftly from the rocking-chair in front of him. The mellow lamplight fell on her pert face; she looked tiny and proud in her creamy, long-skirted taffeta dress.

"Wedding?" she asked. "What wedding?"

"Huh? Why yours and mine, of course." He gave her that reckless grin. "Whose do you suppose?"

"You mean yours and mine?"

"That's what I'm saying, honey."

"Well, don't you suppose," she asked coolly, sweetly, "that it might be wise, before deciding on the wedding, to at least ask the girl whether or not she wanted to marry you?"

For an instant his rugged face was completely bewildered. Then he chuckled. "Why—haven't I ever asked you to marry me?"

"No," Drusilla said, "you have not."

"But we've been keeping steady company," he explained. "I reckon I just took it for granted that——"

"That's the trouble with you," Drusilla interrupted. "You take too much for granted."

"But, Drusilla——"

"And girls particularly don't like to be taken for granted. After all, marrying a girl isn't quite the same thing as buying another freight wagon, or a team of mules."

"But that talk's silly," he protested. Suddenly he stared at her. "You mean—that you don't want to marry me?"

"I mean that I won't be taken for granted, by you or any other man."

He stood up and paced half around the room; he paused abruptly and gazed at her. "Drusilla," he accused, "you're just being stubborn and childish! You know uncommon well I've wanted to marry you ever since I met you."

She sprang swiftly to her feet, her cheeks flushing. "You stop bullying me, Hugh Dolan!" She stamped a tiny foot. "When you talk like that, I—I hate you!"

"Take it easy there." He grinned now, contrite. "Reckon I spoke

hasty, Drusilla. Let's forget it for to-night. Saturday evening we'll go to the Miners' Ball, and——"

"Saturday evening we won't go to the Miners' Ball! Mr. Tranter has already asked me to go with him."

"What?" His face was amazed then, angry. "You're—you're going with *him?*"

"Why shouldn't I go with him?"

"You want to?"

"Of course I want to!"

"So that's it," Hugh said flatly. "You figure Tranter's due to run me out of business, and so I'm no longer good pay dirt."

"Hugh Dolan!" She stared at him. Suddenly she ran forward and pushed against his chest with both small hands. "Why, you get right out of this house! You get out and don't you ever dare to come back?"

"Sure," Hugh said. "Why not?" And he picked up his hat and went outside and put his shoulders savagely against the raw black wind.

Inside the cabin the girl stood motionless, breathing rapidly, staring at the closed door. She said: "The big bruiser! The big nit-wit! The big——" And then she flung both hands over her face and commenced to cry.

HUGH didn't attend the Miners' Ball. But he heard that Drusilla was there, escorted by Sid Tranter. He told himself that he wasn't bothered—that if she was that kind of a girl he didn't want to marry her, anyway—which wasn't the truth at all. He wanted to marry Drusilla Shelton no matter what kind of a girl she was.

There was considerable besides Drusilla, however, to occupy his mind during that next week. Twice a Dolan stage, each time carrying Condor bullion, was stopped by masked bandits, and each time the bandits made a clean get-away with the treasure, leaving behind no clew or traceable spoor. The morning following that second theft, Drusilla's father, old Matt Shelton, stamped into the stage office with a worried look on his square, whiskered face.

"Hugh," he growled, "this has got to stop. Two holdups in one week!"

"I know," Hugh agreed. "I'm doing all I can to protect the shipment. There's something funny about it, Matt. For two years I've run ore and bullion out of here, and up until the last six months I've never lost a shipment. Now there's a regular epidemic of stick-ups, and it's always when I'm carrying Condor bullion."

"I don't know about that," grumbled Matt. "It's my job I'm thinking off. I'm manager of the Condor, and I'm supposed to put the company interests first. I've always liked doing business with you, Hugh, but—well, Sid Tranter's been in to see me. He wants our shipments."

"Sure, he wants them," Hugh said. "He's been wanting 'em ever since he came here. What of it?"

"Just this, Hugh—our bullion's got to be protected!"

"Tranter can't protect it any more than me."

"Yes, he can," contradicted Matt. "Sid went over the Sierras to Frisco last month, Hugh, got himself some big money backing, and now he's made me a proposition."

"How's that?" Hugh glanced up sharply. "What kind of a porposition?"

Matt shrugged. "Says if I give him the Condor business, not only the bullion hauling but all our freighting, then he'll guarantee delivery of everything in transit."

"Guarantee it?"

"Guarantee it," Matt repeated. "He'll give us an agreement, put it

down in black and white, to make good on any loss, whether it's caused by holdup or anything else, that happens while he's carrying our treasure. That would leave the Condor sitting pretty, Hugh, mean that from now on we'd have no losses whatsoever."

Hugh was silent a minute, gazing out the window. He saw in this cagy play Sid Tranter's hole card, and knew it was good. It probably meant the loss of the Condor business, and the loss of the Condor shipments meant his own finish. He looked back at Matt.

"You taking him up, Matt?"

Matt scowled glumly. "Not if you'll equal his offer, Hugh—agree to guarantee future shipments yourself."

Hugh laughed shortly. "Guarantee 'em with what? I got a four-thousand-dollar business here and still owe over three thousand. If I made that guarantee and then lost a big shipment of bullion, I couldn't make it good even if you took me over lock, stock and barrel."

"That's the way I figured it," Matt growled. "Well, it's tough, Hugh."

"Meaning Tranter gets the business?"

"I like you, Hugh," Matt said, "and I hate Tranter's innards. But if he can guarantee shipments, and you can't, well then it's to the best interests of the company to give him the contract. That's what the company expects of me, to get them the best possible deal, and if I don't, they'll boot me out and take on a manager who will."

HUGH had faced this sort of thing before. No matter how hopeless his position seemed, it was not in him to give up, to stop trying. That was his dogged, stubborn way, to go out after something and simply assume it was his until it was definitely lost. He looked up at Matt Shelton, and suddenly smashed his big fist against the desk.

"All right, Matt! I'll guarantee your blasted shipments!"

"Huh?" Matt blinked. "But you just said you didn't have the money, that——"

"It's not with money I'll guarantee them."

"Then what?"

"With my life," Hugh said. "That ought to mean a little something."

Matt glared at him from beneath bristling eyebrows. "Now what you driving at, boy?"

"Just this," snapped Hugh. "Give me one more chance, and from now on, every time the Condor ships bullion, I'll ride that stage box as guard myself. I'll give you my word that as long as I'm alive and can still pull a trigger not one ounce of Condor treasure will be stolen. You know when I say a thing I mean it. Now how about it?"

Matt snorted. "Suicide, I calls it! That's what! You'll just get yourself killed!"

"Maybe not," Hugh returned. "I tell you there's something funny about this sudden rash of stick-ups, always on my stages, always when I'm carrying Condor treasure. I got a hunch that a single bandit outfit is behind it, and if I can once pick off a couple of 'em, I'll break it up, end it."

Matt scratched his woolly gray hair. "Danged if I know what to say, Hugh. Hate to put myself in the position of sending you into a spot where you get yourself killed. Hate to refuse you, too."

"Matt," Hugh said, "do this one

thing for me. I'm asking it as a friend."

Matt scowled morosely, rubbed one hand reflectively over his bushy gray whiskers. "All right," he agreed gruffly. "But I'm doing it against my better judgment, Hugh. And only until another shipment is lost. You protect 'em if you can, but if one more shipment is ever lost, then we go over to Tranter. That's final."

"Fair enough," Hugh agreed. "Is your next clean-up on Wednesday?"

Matt nodded. "Thursday morning you can take out the usual shipment of bullion." He stood up, crossed to the door, then looked back glumly.

"Hugh," he demanded suddenly, "what's happened between you and Drusilla? I always figured that you two——"

"So did I," Hugh interrupted. "But it seems Drusilla didn't. Seems like she prefers Sid Tranter."

"She went to the ball with Tranter," Matt admitted. "I tried to talk to her, asked her why, and she just looks at me and says, 'It's a way out.' Don't know what she meant by that. She talks over my head lots of times. Like to make her toe the line, but I can't do it. Every time I start to lay down the law, she just laughs at me and tickles me under the chin, and then I go all soft. Makes me so mad I have to go out and pick a fight and knock somebody down."

With that final pronouncement of parental dilemma, Matt owlishly shook his head, went out the door. But suddenly he thrust his head back in. "Learned a long time ago I couldn't boss her," he added. "The only way to run that girl, you young fool, is to let her think *she's* running you!" He winked knowingly then, and this time left for good.

UNTIL his calculations were completely upset the following Sunday, Hugh Dolan laid careful plans for the next conveying of Condor bullion. He decided to make up two sections this time, one stage to rush the bullion through, with himself on the box as guard, and no passengers, a second coach to follow later with whatever passengers made up the day's traffic. That way, without passengers to endanger, he would be free should any holdup come to make as bitter a fight as he wished.

That was his plan until Sunday. Sunday evening he ate supper at the Bonanza Restaurant, and then returned to his office, shouldering up the street through that dusty howl of savage wind. He went inside, lit the oil lamp, and sat down at his desk to make up the past week's work book.

He forced himself to his figuring with a positive physical effort. It had been his custom for months to spend these Sunday evenings with Drusilla and Matt Shelton, and thoughts of that small, tempestuous girl kept ghosting through his mind now. His jaw jutted stubbornly and, more obstinately than ever, he bent himself to the work at hand.

For half an hour he continued his figuring, and then, suddenly, the window beside him shattered with a ringing crash. Some heavy object sailed through the room, thudded against the floor. Springing up angrily, Hugh leaped to the door, jerked it open. He peered through the swirling, wind-swept dark but could distinguish no living object, the narrow street seeming deserted, and only a few lights making baleful yellow eyes of scattered windows. After a moment's hesitation, he shrugged, wheeled back into the office and picked up from the floor

the object which had shattered the window.

It was a stone the size of a hen's egg and around the stone was wrapped a piece of paper. Unwrapping the paper, he found that it contained a written message. He spread the note on his desk, studied it. It was scrawled almost illegibly, poorly spelled, and apparently written by an almost illiterate person. It said:

Hugh Dolan. I'm out to get vegeance on some hombres what dubble-cross me. I have give them a bad tip that you are going to take Condor bullyun a day eairly this week so to fool the bandits, and because these hombres is the bandits what are always holding up your stages they will hold it up this week on Wedsday instead of Thurs. If you set a trap for them Wedsday and catch them you will learn who they are and your stages won't be held up no more. You better take this warning and do how I say if you want to catch them bandits. A friend.

Hugh was puzzled. He knew very well that this note might be a fake. But, on the other hand, it might be authentic. And if it was, then certainly it provided an opportunity, a hope, which he had long awaited. Suddenly, smashing his fist against the desk, he decided to accept it, to play it for all it was worth. For a long time then, before going to bed, he sat there thinking, laying his careful plan.

IN the gray mountain dawn Wednesday morning a Dolan stage stopped at the Condor Mine office, and loaded a treasure chest which, by prearrangement with Matt Shelton, was empty. Three passengers were asked to wait for a second section that would go out a few hours later, but at the Miners' Hotel two other men apssengers were picked up. These two, also by prearrangement, were deputy marshals, and in the carpet bags they carried were dismounted scatterguns. As the stage rumbled out of town, with Hugh himself riding guard beside driver Jim Wade, the two deputies within opened their carpet bags, assembling and loading those sawed-off shotguns.

With jingle of harness and whine of wheels the four-horse stage whirled down grade, snaked swiftly on for several hours over the tortuous descent to the Carson mint. About noon they reached Deadman's Gulch, clattered along that narrow, high-walled canyon. All morning the gray endless winds of this mountain had lashed and buffeted the bouncing stage, filling the lonely land with its thin screeching fury, and now stormed through the canyon in booming, cracking gusts.

They approached a steep-walled curve and Jim Wade, fingering his lines and playing his brake pedal like a pianist, skillfully streamed the four fast-trotting horses around it. And then, all in an instant, the frightened horses came to a sliding, tangling halt. Squarely in front of them stood a rock barricade, flung directly across the trail. Even as the animals swerved, halted, a rifle cracked savagely from behind the barricade, and one of the lead horses reared, pawed the air, screamed like a woman, and then fell among his mates in a kicking tangle of harness. Simultaneously a second rifle barked to the left, and Hugh Dolan felt his hat swept from his head. Instantly he thrust up his arms in false token of surrender, and Jim Wade, previously instructed, devoted himself exclusively to quieting his panicked horses.

Three masked men, with leveled rifles, appeared then, two converging in from the brush at either side, and a third rising from behind the bar-

ricade. This one, as they all three closed in, barked:

"Hold that, you two! One wrong move, and it's your finish!"

It was the stage itself that savagely answered, as though it had violently exploded. For those two deputies within, swiftly rising, had thrust their scatterguns through either door flap, loosed their roaring, ripping barrage of buckshot. The bandits approaching on the sides were swept into the air by that lethal gale, smacked back to earth in two screaming heaps. The masked man in front stopped short, amazed at this suddenly aggressive stage, loosed one startled oath, and then, whirling wildly, leaped the barricade and raced madly up the canyon.

Hugh Dolan, sensing that this fleeing one was the leader, never hesitated. In one long spring he sailed from the stage box, whipping out his .45 while he was still in the air. He landed running forward, staggered, caught his balance, and raced on up the canyon in furious pursuit. He strained forward, holding his fire, putting every effort into the driving chase.

The man ahead spurted desperately. In a lunging leap he careened around another canyon curve, and Hugh, racing after him, recklessly followed. He followed straight into a blaze of gunfire, for, even as he circled that curve, the masked fugitive, waiting, leaping suddenly forward, whipping up a six-shooter, firing wildly. Hugh felt that bullet nip his left shoulder, fired back, missing, and then, by the very force of his rush, plunged headlong into the dodging bandit. The man lashed out defensively with his gun barrel, struck Hugh a stunning blow on the side of the head. Hugh, even as his sight blurred dizzily, desperately returned that maneuver, flinging his gun barrel downward in a terrific chopping blow. It struck squarely across the top of his victim's head. The man went limp; he sank without a sound and lay motionless on the ground.

Hugh stood reeling, still dazed from that stunning blow against his head. He heard Jim Wade and the two deputies racing up behind, shouting. Then, his head clearing a little, he reached down and pulled the maks off the unconscious bandit's face. He went rigid. He stood motionless, gazing down at that revealed face, and suddenly he knew a lot—he knew in this moment who had consistently stolen his shipments of Condor bullion, and he knew just why. For this bandit, now unmasked, was—Sid Tranter, owner of that rival stage line.

BACK in town, Sid Tranter made a full confession. In his effort to drive Hugh out of business he had deliberately engineered these many holdups of Dolan stages, and then, trying to cinch Hugh's downfall by offering to guarantee shipments, had bluffed about raising the necessary capital, actually intending to make good on the guarantee, should the need arise, with the very loot he had taken from Hugh.

That confession meant complete success for Hugh. With all his contracts returning, being the only transportation company left on the mountain, he knew that it was only a matter of months until he would be wholly clear of debt. That dream of an expanding stage line, first conceived while doggedly carrying mail through a raging blizzard two years past, was at last realized—but he got from it less satisfaction than he had expected.

The reason was Drusilla. . He knew at last how much that dainty, sparkling girl meant to him, that no future, however economically bright, was worth the effort were she not at his side to share it. With Tranter gone she might again accept his attentions. But that idea stuck in his craw—being second choice and never certain that in her heart she even cared for him.

Thus he was brooding that next morning when Matt Shelton came stomping into the office. "Well, Hugh," Matt boomed, "you sure put yourself in the saddle to stay! From now on, guarantee or no, the Condor contracts are yours, and I reckon all the others on this man's mountain. In the end, it's men that count out here, Hugh; men that decide to do something and then do it despite hell and high water."

"I was lucky, Matt."

"That counts, too," growled Matt. "To know your luck, and have the innards to play it. Say, found out yet who threw that note through your window, tipped you off to catch Tranter?"

Hugh shook his head. "Probably never will. Somebody with a grudge against Tranter, likely one of the very men he hired for the holdups and then beat out of a cut."

Matt turned toward the door, lit his pipe. "Got to get back to the mine," he said. "Meant to tell you I won't be home to-night."

"Huh?" Hugh looked up, puzzled.

"I won't be to home," Matt repeated, "but Drusilla likely will."

Hugh shook his head. "That's one place that I overplayed my luck, Matt."

"Maybe," Matt said. "But you never can tell about that girl. Like one time she got herself set on living winters down in Carson. I didn't want her to go off like that and leave me alone. But I didn't tell her that; instead, just like I'd thought of it myself, I up and order her to live down there in Carson, tell her this mountain is no fit place for a young girl. Well, it made her so mad she like to bust. She plumb refused to go, never has been away more than a week at a time since. Maybe you know how to run a crack stage line, Hugh, but you sure don't know women."

Matt grunted, stumped on out the door. Then he thrust his head back in and grinned. "I still won't be to home to-night," he said.

IN the Shelton cabin that night, Drusilla sat primly erect in the rocking-chair, small hands folded in her lap, and gazed severely at Hugh Dolan.

"Only came to tell you something," Hugh said. "Felt I ought to." He sat forward in his chair, elbows on his big knees, rubbing the palms of his hands slowly together. "Fact is," he went on, "you were right in not wanting to marry me. I've done a lot of thinking, and see now how I wouldn't make a fit husband for any woman. Way I'm always plunging into things, batting around. You sort of opened my eyes to myself, and I said to myself I wouldn't let you marry me now even if you wanted to."

Drusilla's dark eyes flashed suddenly. "You wouldn't *what?*"

He looked up blandly. "I said I wouldn't let myself marry you even if you wanted to. Of course, I know you don't want to, so it doesn't matter anyway."

"Oh, doesn't it?" demanded Drusilla. "What do you think I saved your whole business for?"

"My business?" He looked up, really surprised now.

"Of course," said Drusilla scornfully. "I only went out with Sid Tranter just—just to spite you. Then dad told me how you were going to ride the stage yourself and, like an idiot, get killed. I—I was frightened stiff. But I knew it wouldn't do any good for me to say anything, you're always so bull-headed! Tranter dropped a couple of hints that night at the Miners' Ball, and I always thought you stupid not to suspect him, anyway. I decided to make you catch him in spite of yourself, so I had a talk with Tranter, pretended to let drop innocently that dad had told me you were taking the bullion a day earlier, trying to fool the bandits. I thought if he fell for it, tried to get the bullion that day, it would prove he was really behind the holdups, and if you caught him it would be his finish. Then I threw that note through your window, telling you to expect the holdup a day early, to set a trap. I disguised my handwriting and spelled as badly as I could."

He stared at her blankly. "Drusilla! You did that for me! But why didn't you just tell me?"

"Do you think I'd have let you know I was helping you!"

He gazed at her. Suddenly his face was bland again, expressionless. "That's right," he said. "I forgot how much you hate me." He stood up quickly, reached for his hat.

She flew to her feet, her cheeks flushing. "Why, Hugh Dolan! I *don't* hate you!"

"That's all right, Drusilla." He shook his head morosely. "I understand. Fact is, I don't blame you for hating me, the way I've acted."

She stamped her foot. "Stop saying that! I don't hate you! I—I love you!"

He shook his head sadly. "No, you're just saying that to be nice, but you really——"

She ran to him, flung her arms around his neck, clung to him. "But I *do* love you. And we're going to be married. Right away. To-morrow!"

He put her gently back. "No, Drusilla. I think too much of you to let you——"

"Hugh Dolan, we're going to be married to-morrow!"

He looked startled, almost frightened. "All right," he agreed hastily. "All right. But I reckon I'll never be really sure you don't hate me. Reckon you'll always have to be convincing me you don't."

"That," said Drusilla, "won't be so hard," and pressed her soft young lips tenderly to his.

Just then the door behind them opened suddenly. Old Matt Shelton looked in and abruptly howled with malicious glee. He disappeared for an instant, then thrust his head back in. "That's right, Drusilla!" he roared. "Tickle him under the chin. Now we'll see how *he* likes it!"

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DESERTERS' GOLD

By JUDSON MOBLEY

Author of "Lead Legacy," etc.

CHAPTER I.

LURE OF GOLD.

INSIDE her dingy tent, Betty Clark crouched and listened fearfully to the conversation going on outside. Every night for a week now it had been going on, and the girl knew for a surety that her father's resistance was crumbling. He was being won over by the treacherous propaganda of the gigantic, swarthy-faced plow shaker.

"You'd be a blasted nut to keep on diggin' ditches to water other men's farms when there's thousands o' dollars' worth o' gold dust that's yours fer the takin'," Ryman insinuated softly.

"If I could be sure." James Clark almost whined.

"Sure? It's a dead mortal cinch," Ryman retorted. "Besides, what've you got to lose? You been subcontractin' for twenty-five years accordin' to your own tell, an' what've you got? A miserable little gyppo outfit—a few horses, tents, an' some half-wore-out machinery."

"That's true," Clark allowed, "yet I can make a livin', an' this other is a gamble."

"Hell of a livin' you make," Ryman scorned. "Look at your daughter—ain't had a new pair o' stockin's fer eight months."

The crouching girl glanced down at her much-mended hosiery, and a blush suffused her face. Yet she felt it was far better to endure the poverty and dirt of the construction camp than to listen to the blandishments of this uncouth stranger.

"Besides," Ryman was droning on argumentatively, "this ain't no gamble. I tell you the gold was found by a prospector in the days of the old gold rush, an' it was the richest ever found in the Shoshone Mountains. Then these four army deserters that I been tellin' you about got wise an' murdered the prospector. Right after that the gov'ment got after 'em an' they had to leave. It was from the last one of 'em that I got the location, an' he died right after that."

"But how come he to tell you and nobody else?" Clark reiterated. It was the objection he had been urging for the past week.

"Well, I'll tell you frankly then," Ryman said after a pause. "I got in trouble an' got sent to the pen. The old codger was doin' a life term, an' we got to be friends."

For a long time there was silence. With beating heart the girl hoped that this confession would decide her father to have nothing to do with Ryman. But his next words killed her hope.

"It sounds convincin', an' if the gold is there an' can be got at——" Clark faltered.

"With your horses an' machinery we can easy do what them deserters couldn't. We can bring water around the mountain, put in a hydraulic, an' wash it out in a hurry. We won't need nobody but just us, your wife an' Betty."

"By golly, I'll do it!" James Clark surrendered at last. "I'll give up this contract, fire the men, an' we'll pull out right away."

Fear settled over the tensely breathing girl with a strange, numbing feeling. Never had she felt such fear of a human being as she had felt toward "Slug" Ryman from the first day of his arrival. In the main, the men who followed construction work were harmless, and she had long ago learned to put them in their place if they were not. But Ryman was different. He had not ignored her. Indeed, at sight of her his eyes lighted up with a strange fire that she could not understand—simply because she knew nothing of the primitive woman hunger which dominates the mind of a man long incarcerated behind iron bars.

He had seldom spoken to her, thereby giving her no chance to repulse him; but she understood that he was prevailing upon her father to take them into a veritable wilderness, where she sensed they would all be helpless in his power.

She could understand the reason for her father yielding to temptation. Practically all of her life had been under the dingy tents of a small "gyppo" construction outfit. Wherever there was a big construction job going on, whether road grading, canal building, or work of a similar kind, there was James Clark with his small outfit to take a subcontract whereby he did the work and the main contractor drew in the profit.

CLARK was known as a loose-dirt contractor—principally because he never had the means to tackle the harder, but better-paying jobs. His outfit usually

consisted of a heavy Number 5 grading plow, three or four Fresno scrapers, a portable water tank, primitive blacksmith tools, and tents enough to house his family, his men and his horses. His wife did the cooking and his crew came and went. But for years James Clark himself had toiled amid sun and dust until his wrinkled hide had taken on a soil color that could never be removed. He moved the dirt at so much per yard, and his only friends were rival gyppo contractors as poor and weather-beaten as himself.

In winter, or when construction work was slack, the Clarks would move to the outskirts of some town, but as a rule they continued to live in their tents to save rent. Therefore the only people with whom Betty associated to any extent were the rough, uncouth graders who worked for her father, and were guaranteed their pay by the head contractor. Few of them were interested in the silent, calico-clad girl who slipped about the tents. But many of these transients were men who had seen much of the world, and they all held to a bold, independent philosophy of life. The girl listened much to their talk, and in a way became wise. Also she learned a greater self-reliance than more carefully reared maidens usually manage to secure.

But she knew that James Clark had never prospered, never would prosper—no more than the hundreds of other gyppo contractors who made it possible for a few big contractors to take big jobs and get them done cheaply and quickly. There had been times when James had fretted peevishly and complained that Betty ought to have more schooling. The girl did not know just how deeply that feeling went, but she sensed vaguely that dim yearnings for better things for himself and his family occasionally stirred in Clark's soul. There had, indeed, once been possibilities in James Clark. No wonder, then, that he had listened to this flippant tale of easy gold.

Slug Ryman had limped into camp looking for a job. The outfit was then working in hard pan, and no man on the outfit could hold the handles of the big plow as it loosened the dirt for the Fresnos. Ryman had voluntarily gripped the plow handles, and the powerful plow horses could not draw the plow fast enough to shake him loose. He had got the job, and soon after he had got James Clark interested in the deserters' mine.

Betty got up and went outside. She wanted to be alone, and she was accustomed to taking long walks alone through the gray sages that stretched away for miles in every direction from the big, forty-foot-deep canal which, when completed, was to change the worthless desert to a rich land of farms and cities.

The girl drew a deep breath and gazed away to where a rising moon changed the dingy sage to a magic forest of silver bushes. So she had often looked, and a familiar ache came to her heart. For years and years they had been slaving to make it possible for other people to have homes. Were they never to have a home of their own?

It was not dreams of luxury and finery which filled the girl's mind. She wanted comfort; she wanted a house—and she wanted land with lots of water on it. She had had her fill of dust and aridity. She wanted never to see a water tank again.

After all, what if there should be gold which they could get? It

would mean education, cleanliness, and the ranch for which she had always longed. She suddenly began to grow mildly excited. Her eyes brightened, and a bit of color came into her cheeks.

She heard a cough. Slug Ryman had come out of her father's tent and was eying her from a distance of less than twelve feet. For the moment he had removed his pipe from his mouth and was holding it in one hand. The top of the bowl gave off a dull glow that struck her fanciful mind as symbolic of the evil fires within the man's nature. His eyes were dwelling on her slim figure.

At her gasp of resentment Ryman chuckled. "Did you know I'm goin' to deck you-all out in silks an' feathers one o' these days?" he asked her.

Unable to think of a suitable answer, Betty shook her head in hurried negation and darted away. She regretted almost instantly that she had not retreated inside her tent. What if he should follow her?

She glanced fearfully back over her shoulder, but Ryman was still standing there with his hands on his hips with his filthy pipe tipped a cocky angle in his repulsive mouth.

He laughed aloud as the girl broke into a run.

THE long drive was nearly over. For days Betty Clark had sat upon the hard spring seat of a wagon with a pair of heavy, greasy lines in her hands. Three wagons were held sufficient to haul the gyppo outfit to the scene of the great venture for gold. On the lead wagon, behind four horses, sat Slug Ryman; his pipe eternally in his mouth, and the cunning, cruel smile playing upon first one and then the other corner of his mouth as the pipe shifted. Next came James Clark and his wife with another four-horse team, and behind them, catching the dust from all three slow-moving vehicles came Betty.

For a long time there had been no road. Many times the men were obliged to cut out trees for the passage of the wagons, or again build bridges, or occasionally dig short dugways where no other means of getting along could be discovered. It had been hills and canyons so long that the girl longed for a sight of level land.

She had lagged a short distance behind the other wagons, and they suddenly turned a bend and disappeared from sight. It was nearly time for the night camp and she did not hurry. Then, when her own wagon rounded the bend, she gave a gasp of startled pleasure.

Here, where she least expected to find anything of the sort, was a beautiful little valley. It was not more than a mile wide, and scarcely four miles in length. There was no forbidding sagebrush growing upon it, no noxious weeds. Everywhere was a thick, luscious growth of green grass, ankle-high.

Near the head of the valley stood a grove of beautiful trees, the outer edge curving gracefully into the nook made by a projecting ridge. By the more luxuriant growth Betty guessed there was water there, a spring or a small creek. She fell instantly in love with the place.

"Oh, what a place for a ranch," she breathed.

The other wagons were heading for the grove of trees, and by the time they reached it, Betty had caught up with them. A hundred yards away she suddenly discovered a small, tidy log cabin, with a stable a few yards in the rear. She ex-

perienced a pang of disappointment that somebody else had preëmpted the valley.

She caught a glimpse of Slug Ryman's face as he crawled down from his wagon, and it was surely murderous.

"If somebody else has got in here ahead of us——" the man said ominously. Betty saw that he had buckled a gun belt around his waist, and a heavy revolver swung in the holster.

"Is—is this near the place?" James Clark queried.

"It ain't more'n a mile from here —right up that gulch," Ryman growled. "I'm goin' to investigate that cabin, so git your rifle ready an' if you see anybody sneakin' around, drill 'em."

Betty felt a flash of foreboding as her father reached behind the seat and brought forth his rifle, which he held nervously across his knee.

Ryman slouched across to the cabin and disappeared. Five minutes later he came out. He looked relieved, but his face still wore a frown.

"Ain't been nobody here this year," he said, "but whoever built this cabin built it solid an' left things inside that means he intends to come back."

"An' if he does?" Clark queried.

"He'll be wise to stay away," Ryman growled ominously.

Betty agreed silently that the stranger would at least be wise to be careful.

"Do you suppose somebody else has——" Clark faltered, not quite daring to name the thing he dreaded. The gyppo contractor had made a very real sacrifice in coming thus far. If failure awaited him he would have a hard time getting back and making ends meet until he could get a new contract.

"Not a chance," Ryman assured him. "If anybody found this mine they wouldn't be pullin' out till they worked it. An' there ain't been no ditches made."

Clark heaved a tremulous sigh of relief.

"We'd better camp right here till we look around an' git settled," Ryman decided.

THEY made camp hurriedly, with a strong undercurrent of excitement. Mrs. Clark, who always took things as they came, because there had been no other alternative in her life, was the only one to more than nibble at the food she prepared.

Even after she had gone to bed, Betty heard the men talking in low undertones of what they proposed to do.

Long before daylight, Clark roused his wife to cook breakfast. The men gobbled down their food as the first streaks of daylight broke up a cloudy sky, and then they were away.

Betty took care of the horses, rounding them all up, and staking one, her pony, Brownie, and letting the rest have their liberty again. For a time the horses grazed on the succulent grass of the meadow, and then they sought the shade of the trees to browse in lazy content.

Betty was almost happy. She wanted to gallop Brownie madly over that level meadow from one end to the other. She wanted to explore every ridge and gulch that lay within sight. She even wanted to plant a garden. But she had to help her mother in the tedious business of establishing a permanent camp.

Again and again she was brought

up by her mother's plaintive repetition, "Will he like it this way, I wonder?" The query always referred to Slug Ryman; never to James Clark. It served to make Betty realize just how much the family was dominated by this fellow who only a short time before had been merely her father's hired hand.

The men returned at night tired and feverish with excitement. They had not yet found the gold deposit which Ryman was sure was there, but the man was confident that their search would be rewarded the next day.

It was.

James Clark came dashing into camp; stumbling and falling in his haste to impart the news. "It's there, ma! It's there!" he yelled. And in his hand were a number of tiny particles of gold.

Clark was too much shaken by the discovery to do anything more that day, but it had a different effect upon Slug Ryman. Now that the vague doubt which must have rested in his mind had been removed, he became more his natural self. He rolled his sleeves above his hairy forearms and went to work. Once more Betty found his gaze occasionally resting upon her in the old half-fierce, half-amused way. Her fear of the man returned.

But soon things began to happen which demonstrated to her that she must do something more than fear. Both her parents were utterly under the sway of the fellow, and she realized that they would be helpless to oppose anything that he might do. But somebody would have to oppose, and that somebody could only be she. The very first time the man snapped out an order to her she refused to obey it.

"Huh?" The fellow was amazed. He paused with his hands on his hips and regarded her cynically. She would have felt easier had he shown more anger.

"All right, girlie, I'll do it myself," he said. "One o' these days, though, you'll be jumpin' every time I snaps me finger. Git me?"

His confidence daunted her.

"We'll git to work to-morrow on our ditch," he said to Clark. "There's a good-sized creek in a canyon over that ridge, but by goin' a mile or so up we can bring all the water we need in here."

"But wouldn't it be better to file a legal claim on this first?" Clark demanded.

"No," Ryman thundered. "We couldn't hold it all, an' we don't want nobody up here takin' part of it, an' mebbe pullin' some law dodge to beat us out o' the water or somethin'. Besides, there ain't no danger o' any one comin' in here."

Clark was not convinced. Nor did he guess that Slug Ryman's real fear was because he was an escaped convict, with eight years of a prison sentence yet to serve if apprehended.

"If this fellow who built this cabin should come back, then what?" Clark asked.

"Leave him to me," Ryman said darkly. "We'll move into the cabin, an' one o' the women will always stick around. If he comes they'll tell him that we've jumped his place. They can talk to him till I git here. After that he won't bother none."

Betty's heart turned cold. Ryman meant to murder the man who had built the cabin, and she and her mother were expected to aid and abet him in the crime. If they refused she knew Ryman would exact vengeance from somebody.

CHAPTER II.

OWNER OF THE CABIN.

THE work of bringing the water to the placer mine began at once with tremendous energy being shown by Slug Ryman, and with James Clark trying to hold the pace as best he might.

"Gotta git her done an' have that bar washed out 'fore snow flies," Ryman declared grimly.

Betty had visited the rocky bar at a fork in the gulch which was said to contain so much of the precious mineral. She had to own that the sight of the vast potentialities gave her a thrill; yet she derived not half the satisfaction there as she did from contemplation of the pleasant little valley, where she was already building a ranch in her dreams. There she could picture houses, barns, corrals, fat stock, growing hay and grain, and beautiful gardens.

She found little time to dream, however, because it was her job to take things to the men as they were needed. They had run a rough survey for the proposed ditch, showing that there was sufficient gravity to get the water high up on the bar. Once there, there would be sufficient force to annihilate the entire bar in a short time. The job, however, presented great difficulties. The canal had to be built through rocky ground, and the biggest job of all was to put in a diversion dam in the mountain torrent.

Betty had to admire Ryman's tremendous strength and efficiency as he got things done. By rights they should have had three men to help them, but Ryman came near taking their places himself. At the same time his brutish figure in overalls and grubby undershirt, which he seldom changed, disgusted her.

Busy as he was, the man found time to gibe her about the time when he would have her tamed. He made no secret of his intentions concerning her when they got the gold.

"You'll like me, honey," he predicted.

"I'll despise you," she retorted.

"I can tame you, never fear—an' I'll sure enjoy doin' it," he laughed.

"You never will," she told him forcefully. She no longer shrank from such encounters. She feared and hated the man more than ever, but knowing that she would have to face the issue with him sooner or later, she tried to gain strength by combating him whenever he began his taunts. As yet he had not laid hands upon her except to touch her casually and pass on when there was no opportunity for her to resist.

Then, one day, Betty found her longed-for opportunity to do a little exploring. She rode to the lower end of the valley, glorying in its possibilities; then, leaving Brownie to graze around, she climbed on foot to the top of a pinnacle that overlooked her valley.

She found a smooth stone and sat down, gazing afar pensively with her chin cupped in her hands. She had been daydreaming so for a considerable time when the rattle of disturbed stones a short distance below brought her sharply to her feet.

Sixty feet below her was a man toiling up the slope. He was in his shirt sleeves, and was perspiring freely from his climb; and his face wore a cheerful grin.

In one swift glance the girl took in his whole appearance. The big hat and high-heeled boots, if nothing else, were enough to betray his vocation. His tanned face, and eyes that were slightly squinted from gazing much at far-distant objects,

testified eloquently to long days spent in the open.

He stopped and called cheerfully. "Don't drop a rock on me, because it'd be an awful roll to the bottom."

Betty was unaware until that moment that she was clutching a small rock in her hand.

"Maybe the top of this hill belongs to me," she retorted.

"Gosh, I hope not," he called back, and renewed his climb.

He laughed cheerfully when he reached the top, and mopped his face with a big red handkerchief. Betty saw that he was older than she had thought. He might be, she thought now, nearly thirty. Yet his face was boyish and pleasing.

"It's an awful climb to get up here, but the view is worth it," he stated. "It always was a favorite place with me."

Betty felt her blood turning cold. Was it possible that this gay stranger was the man who had built the cabin; that he was the man Slug Ryman meant to murder if he came back?

"I saw your pony down there an' I climbed up here to see if I could find the rider," he said as she continued to maintain her silence.

"Do you have to locate every stranger you see or hear about?" she demanded.

"No," he grinned, "but when the stranger proves to be as attractive as you it's not a bad rule."

Betty suddenly became a bit self-conscious. She was not shabbily dressed, but she knew her clothes were cheap and not always becoming. Around the gyppo camp she had been generally indifferent to her personal appearance. She was always neat, but there had been no person whom she particularly wished to impress. She found herself wanting to be good-looking in this man's eyes.

"How do you happen to be here? I ain't seen any strangers for a long while—ain't seen any, in fact," she blurted out, and instantly feared that she had said the wrong thing.

"You've been here a long time?" he instantly parried.

"Well, a few weeks."

"Livin' here?" he asked with an undeniable frown.

Betty nodded.

"Close to the cabin up there?"

"In it," she acknowledged, wondering if he would fly into a rage at the news if he were the man who had built it.

"Yes?" he murmured. "You're too young to be a homesteader yourself. Has some of your folks filed a homestead on it, perhaps?"

"Yes, yes, my father," she said hurriedly. "We—we found it abandoned and we moved in."

SHE found him looking at her so steadily, and with a quizzical grin barely playing upon his lips that she went on desperately.

"It'll make the most wonderful ranch. We can raise all the hay we need out here on the meadow; there's lots of range, and timber to build everything we want."

"It's a long way from civilization, don't you think?" he countered. "There's no real road out of here—an' before you can raise hay you'll have to have water."

"We can get water from the creek over that ridge. The—the men are building a canal now."

She saw the look of disappointment cross his face. "Have they got much stock?" he asked.

Betty shook her head truthfully. "We—we'll get the stock later—after we get the place fixed up."

"Well, I'll have to admit that this

is something of a wallop to me," the young man confessed. He was grinning still, but the girl saw that there was no glow of fun in his eyes. "My name is David Martin—not that it matters—an' I happened to build that cabin you folks are livin' in."

Because she already suspected it, Betty could not pretend surprise. "I—I'm sorry," she faltered.

"I knew I was late," he admitted. "The government only gives a fellow five months' absence from his place during the year, an' I'm six months away all right. I suppose that makes it jumpable. But I sure did figger to make this an A1 cattle ranch."

"You have cattle?" Betty asked sympathetically.

"Well, yes," David admitted hesitantly. "Fortunately, they're on trail, an' yet a long ways from here."

Betty felt something beating within her breast that she thought must be her conscience. He was taking this very hard, and it was a shame. Yet if she did not turn him back some way he would discover what her father and Ryman were really after, and Ryman would kill him. Indeed, she was sure the man would kill any interloper on sight to prevent his discovery of their intention. But she could not help thinking that if David Martin could only stay, life would be much more interesting for her. In her heart she knew that she would never be permitted to build her dream ranch, but she could watch it growing under his capable hands.

"I feel very sorry for you," she said.

"Oh, that's all right," he said absently after a moment in which he was thinking deeply. "It just occurs to me that things may not be as hard as they seem."

"No?" Betty was becoming frightened again.

"No. Of course, your father, or whoever it was did the filing, had to file a contest against me. I could fight it and maybe stand a good chance to win. I haven't been overdue long, an' I had a good excuse. I gather, too, that your folks really jumped me before my time was up—the old wagon tracks coming in here told me that much. But I don't want to have trouble." He paused, thinking, and the girl waited for him to go on.

"Now you say your folks haven't got cattle yet. I don't suppose they've filed on all the land in this valley. If there's any left I'm goin' to file on it, an' then make them a proposition to help build the canal, and buy their hay till they can get cattle of their own. What do you think of it?"

"It won't do," Betty protested, very much frightened.

Her alarm was so real that David realized it was no light thing.

"Anyway, there'd be no objection to me seeing your folks an' making them a proposition, would there?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, there would," Betty said urgently. "You—you mustn't go up there at all. Don't ask me why, but please, please go back."

Without being conscious of what she was doing she took both of David's arms in her firm, supple fingers and shook him gently in an effort to convince him somehow that he must believe her without asking for too much explanations.

David was convinced of her sincerity, and he sensed that it was for his safety, and not her folks' interests that she was pleading. He felt himself strangely moved. Something in this girl's clear, intelligent eyes appealed to him mightily. In

his busy life he had had little time for women or girls, but here, he thought, was exactly the type of girl for a man to marry if he wanted a partner who would stick to him through thick and thin, and carry her own part as well.

"Well, if you feel so strongly about it, I'll go back," he said regretfully. He saw a look of vast relief flash across her face, but a moment later he was puzzled as he saw a look of almost hopeless despair take its place. This girl, he knew, was in trouble of some kind.

"Well, I'll leave you alone on your pedestal—or pinnacle, I should say," he said with affected gayety. "But you'll shake hands with me, an' we'll be friends, won't we? And you'll tell me your name, too, won't you?"

"Yes," she said with a somewhat dreary smile. "My name is Betty Clark." She gave him her hand, and he held it longer than was at all necessary. A burning color came over her face as her nerves responded to his firm grasp, and the eloquent look in his eyes.

David dropped her hand abruptly and began his descent of the hill. The girl watched him as he went down gracefully, despite the high-heeled boots, which made his descent a hard one.

Here was the one man, she thought, who had ever interested her. There had been something in his eyes which told her that if she was with him much they would become more than friends. Yet he had come and gone, and she had sent him away—had lied to do it. She gulped as something stuck in her throat. At that moment she hated James Clark and the gold as much as she hated Slug Ryman.

At the foot of the hill, David Martin mounted his horse, and after a moment's deliberation swung around on the back trail. There was a bit of a cynical, unmirthful grin on his face.

"The girl's all right. She's a thoroughbred through an' through, an' she's honest," he murmured aloud. "Just the same there's a bunch of crooks up there, an' I'll bet my hat it's the Dillard gang."

He rode on, brooding. There were few organized gangs of outlaws left in the West, but here and there in such wild regions as the Shoshones were shifting bodies of men who made at least sporadic ventures in crime, and fled back here where they were reasonably safe.

The summer before, when building his cabin, David had heard of the Dillard gang, and had even talked with its reputed leader, Niles Dillard. He had little doubt now that Dillard had seen the advantage of this practically unknown valley and was making it a sort of depot, if not headquarters, for his gang.

"There's much to it," he mused grimly a little later on. "If it's the Dillard gang they won't hardly have dared to file a contest against me till they made sure with a bullet that I won't appear against them. I can find out at the land office at Fourbear if it still belongs to me, and if it does——"

CHAPTER III.

WARNING.

BELIEVING that she had averted a tragedy by sending David Martin away, Betty felt relief in one way, while in another she was filled with frenzied impatience. Much as she had come to love the little valley she wanted the men to get their gold and get away from there before some one else came along to tempt them to do murder.

The gold now meant less than nothing to her. She feared its possibilities for harm, however; because she was becoming reluctantly convinced that it was turning her father's mind. Heretofore he had been a reasonably kindly parent, but now he seldom spoke to her without a growl or a curse, and the look in his eyes was strange and disconcerting.

Betty knew there was no chance to get her father away until the gold question was settled, and then she sensed that Slug Ryman would have to be reckoned with. The man was becoming daily more overbearing, and she was convinced that the huge amount of work he did each day kept him from bothering her more than he did.

She wanted to take her mother into her confidence regarding the stranger whom they had dispossessed, but she dared not. Mrs. Clark would undoubtedly tell the tale to her husband, and she knew that Ryman would get it then, and he would be angry.

She cheerfully did the work they assigned her, but most of it was too hard for her strength, and she still had idle moments to spend exploring the country with her pony.

On one of these exploring trips she made the discovery that still other men knew of what Ryman had named "Gold Valley." Pausing to rest her horse on a climb to the top of a high ridge she saw two men suddenly appear in the saddle of another ridge half a mile to her right.

Immediately spurring Brownie into a thicket of aspens she interestedly watched the maneuvers of the men. She saw them quickly draw back as they sighted what she knew must have been her father and Ryman at work. Then they changed from the course they had been going, and she guessed that they were riding up to where they could inspect the ditch that had been made.

Changing her position cautiously, Betty once more sighted the men, so close at hand that she flung herself from her horse and clasped her hand over Brownie's nose lest he give them away. She could see their faces plainly, and hear the drone of their voices, though most of their words were indistinct.

They were dressed as cowboys, as David Martin had been, but they were older, harder-looking men. One of them she saw had cruel eyes and a weak chin; the other man's face was regular and handsome, but with such an expression of cruelty upon it that the girl involuntarily caught her breath with fear. Once she heard the man with the weak chin address the other as Niles, but the rest was indistinguishable.

She found that the two men entered the gulch close to the gold bar and rode on down until they were near to the cabin, where she lost sight of them.

Had they noticed anything out of the way at the gold bar? Ryman and her father had done some work there with pick and shovel, but Ryman had been careful to obliterate the signs. Still there were undoubtedly tracks around, and the strangers might have keen eyes.

Betty turned back and approached the cabin from the other side.

"Any visitors to-day, ma?" she queried casually.

"Visitors? No. What do you mean?" her mother asked suspiciously.

"Oh, nothin'. Just seems like it would be interestin' if somebody did come, though, don't it?" Betty said carelessly.

"Well, it sure wouldn't," Mrs.

Clark said curtly. "I b'lieve Slug Ryman would kill anybody who come here to get our gold. An'—in a way—you can't blame him. Don't you let the menfolks hear you longin' fer company."

"But ain't it ever occurred to you that somebody might come here who didn't know anything about the gold, an' didn't have designs on it?" Betty objected.

"You can't never tell," Mrs. Clark said darkly. "They'd be sure to see what the men are doin' an' they'd want to file claims at any rate, an' Ryman says that would be the same thing as robbin' us."

"You don't believe everything that Ryman says, do you?" Betty asked sarcastically.

"Don't forgit it's Ryman who is makin' it possible for us to git this stake an' do the things fer you we've always wanted to do fer you," Mrs. Clark snapped.

"I'd rather do without than take anything from him," Betty retorted with equal heat.

"He's not very pretty while he's toilin' out here to make a fortune fer us, but when he gits the gold an' gits dressed up he'll be good enough even fer you, my lady," her mother said angrily.

Nothing was to be gained by such a quarrel and Betty picked up her father's rifle and went out. She had learned to shoot fairly well, and she kept the table fairly well supplied with fresh game, a welcome change from the plain food they had brought with them.

That night she studied the men's faces closely and decided that they knew nothing of the presence of the strangers. She knew, too, that the strangers must have gone back the way they had come. Was it ominous or not?

She had been given strict orders to report at once if she saw anybody, and she knew that she would get in serious trouble if they ever found out she had seen some one and not told about it. But she had not told about David Martin, and never intended to. Who the other strangers were she had no idea, but until they did more than look around she determined to hold her peace.

FOUR days later Betty found Ryman coming toward her on his return from work. There was an anticipatory grin on his ugly face, and she would have turned away had he not called to her. Then she saw that he was dragging behind him a poor, fuzzy, yellow little animal which she at first thought to be a pup.

"Look here what I brought you for a playmate," he called cheerfully, reaching back and seizing the little animal cruelly by the scruff of the neck.

The animal's eyes were red with fright; it was clawing desperately, but Ryman's hold was so tight that it was half strangled, and its tongue protruded painfully.

Moved by pity for the helpless creature, Betty sprang forward and seized the animal by the forepaws to rescue it. Ryman released his grasp and instantly its jaws snapped together, the sharp little teeth sinking deep into the tender flesh of the girl's hand.

With a scream, Betty dropped the pup and it darted for the brush. But Ryman struck out with a great hand that caught the creature on the side of the head and knocked it rolling for fifteen feet. Before it stopped rolling he had it again by the scruff of the neck.

"You can't fool with this critter like it was a dog," he chuckled.

"This here is a full-blood he-wolf pup that I dug out of his den this afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Betty demanded angrily, holding up her bleeding hand.

"Did give you quite a nick, didn't he?" Ryman said, more with amusement than sympathy, as he pinioned the squirming pup against his side with his elbow and took the girl's fingers in his.

"Here, lemme see it," he ordered, raising the hand toward his face.

Betty jerked the hand free and ran toward the pool where the horses watered. With a gasp of relief she thrust her hand in up to the elbow. When assured she would not pollute the other hand she washed out the wound as best she could. Later she permitted her mother to bandage it rudely.

Ryman had chained up the wolf pup, and was already busy with its "training." Each time the frightened, tormented little creature tried to bite, he would bowl it over with a slap of his huge fist. It was the first lesson of many that the girl was to witness in the days that followed, until the wolf pup learned not to retaliate. Ryman named the pup "Danger."

At supper that night Ryman dilated humorously upon Betty's wound.

"Like as not she'll git blood poison now," he predicted.

"I don't care," Betty flared, unable to longer stand the man's taunts.

For once Ryman was goaded out of his chuckling confidence. An angry look came over his swart face. "One o' these days, me gal, you're goin' to git mighty used to me. Understand?"

"Betty, that's no way to talk," Mrs. Clark reproved.

Knowing that it was useless to fight back, Betty swallowed her humiliation and left the table.

When she saw Ryman again the next morning, his anger had passed. He greeted her with a coarse joke, and then inquired as to the condition of her hand. It was sore and swollen, but she would make no complaint.

"I ketched that wolf fer you because I figgered you was lonesome," he said. "He'll be lots o' company fer you when I gits him tamed. Some people say you can't tame a wolf, but I know better—I tamed one once till he'd eat outta my hand."

"This one has already eaten out of my hand," Betty said with sardonic humor.

Ryman laughed appreciatively. "I'll take that all out o' him," he promised.

"If he is just to be a pet for me, please turn him loose—or kill him," Betty requested.

"Not on your life," Ryman refused promptly. "Not only is he goin' to be a pet fer you, but mebbe a sort o' object lesson."

Betty knew well enough what the man meant, but when she overheard him warning her parents what would happen if the wolf pup were turned loose, she dared not risk it herself.

Many times in the days that were to come, Betty cried for sympathy with the abused Danger. It was not long until Ryman taught it not to bite, though its lips always curled menacingly whenever any one came near. Furtively, Betty tried to make friends with the little beast. At first, it was slow process, but it learned to endure her touch, and later on seemed really to enjoy her caresses, and whined with eagerness whenever she came near. But

Ryman continued to treat it with needless abuse.

Meantime, the work on the canal was progressing rapidly. The men were blind to all but their labor, and the strain was beginning to tell upon James Clark. Betty wondered what would become of them if her father should die, or worse, lose his mind.

Despite her efforts to conceal the fact, her injured hand was getting worse. It was soon so swollen and inflamed that it was noticeable, and her mother's remedial treatment only seemed to make it worse. There was soon very little that she could do, and she was not even able to hunt with the rifle. Her spare hours she spent with Brownie roaming around the country.

THEN one day she unexpectedly came face to face with two horsemen—the two she had seen spying upon the camp. Before she could turn Brownie, the men had spurred beside her, and the larger man grasped her bridle reins.

"Well, my beauty, where do you come from?" he asked.

"Let loose of my reins," she ordered.

"Oh, don't be in a hurry to go," he said reproachfully. "Purty girls are too scarce up here in the mountains for us to let one like you git away too easy."

Cold, dark fear settled over the girl. She found herself unable to frame words.

"What are you folks doin' in here, anyhow?" her captor demanded.

"It—it's none of your business," she managed to retort.

"Spunky little vixen, eh, Niles?" the chinless man grinned.

"Seems to be. Just the same, I figger she's goin' to tell me what the game is down there," Niles replied.

"I'll tell you nothing," Betty replied.

"Has Martin himself been up here lately?" Niles asked.

Betty gave an involuntary start. "No. Why?" she added before she could check herself.

"We was just wonderin' how long it would be before he brought his cattle up here. Looks like he was more ambitious than we thought. Didn't think he'd be fool enough to try to make a real ranch out of this."

"Why—why can't we make a real ranch out of it?" Betty demanded upon a flash of inspiration. The men apparently suspected nothing of the gold. If she could keep them thinking of a ranch it might save trouble in the future.

"Mostly because it won't be healthy for the men who try to make it." The man called Niles smiled sardonically.

"And it won't be healthy for any one who tries to bother us," Betty retorted spunkily.

Niles laughed as if in appreciation of a good joke. "We were goin' down there to tell you folks they'd better move out, but I believe you can make a better talk for us than we could ourselves. So you tell 'em they've got just four days to git out of here."

"They'll not go," Betty declared.

"You might add that they won't git any help from David Martin, because he's goin' to change his mind also."

Betty was thinking rapidly. The mention of David Martin convinced her that these men were only would-be ranchers who were sore because David had beaten them to the valley. They apparently thought her people were only working for Martin. Would it be better to let them continue to think so, or should she

tell them that her people had no connection with Martin?

"You can't run no bluff on us, an' if you try any funny business you'll get hurt," she told them boldly. She decided not to mention Martin herself. If these fellows thought that he might arrive with more men, so much the better—anything to keep them from starting trouble.

"We'll take chances on that," Niles laughed. "An' when we come we'll try to see that you don't git hurt. In fact, I'll make it my special duty to take care of you."

There was a timbre in his sinister laugh which made the girl hate him violently. That laugh held the same note as Ryman's chuckle. Were all men brutes?—she wondered.

"I'll take care of myself, don't you worry," Betty said defiantly. "So will the rest of us."

"Well, you just tell 'em that we have used this range here for the last five years, an' that we're not goin' to stand for nesters comin' in. If any of your menfolks have ever heard of Niles Dillard they'll know enough to move out peacefully while they can."

The fellow had released his hold upon her bridle and Betty instantly took the opportunity to depart. She could see no way to avert a tragedy. Niles Dillard had impressed her with his determination. He was not a man to make threats lightly. On the other hand Ryman would not be driven out easily. There was little to choose between the two men, and she would not have cared greatly to see them destroy each other, but she knew that her own family could not hope to escape unless they broke with Ryman.

She had to tell of seeing the men this time, but she waited until Ryman had gone to bed before she told her parents what Niles Dillard had said. Her father's face worked convulsively.

"I'll kill any man on sight now who tries to come between me an' this gold, after all I've gone through to git it," he said. He picked up the rifle in his skinny hands, and Betty shrank away in fear as she saw the insane glow in his eyes.

"But, father, there's more than two of these men. You and Ryman can't hope to fight them all. And if they come, they'll surely find out what you are after, an' then the valley will be full of gold hunters. You can't kill them all."

"I'll never give up. I'll have that gold or die fightin' for it," the man mumbled.

"I've been thinkin', father," Betty said gently. "I believe that if you went an' filed a claim on that gold bar that you could hold it, an' the law would help you. Regardless of Slug Ryman it's what you ought to do. Let's hitch up in the morning an' go file on it."

"No; it won't do—Ryman says we wouldn't be able to hold anything," he declared obstinately. "We'll fight for what we got. I'm goin' to tell Ryman now."

Half an hour later they called Betty. Ryman seized her roughly by the shoulder.

"Tell me all about this," he commanded. "Just what did them fellers say? What did they look like?"

"Let loose of me and I'll talk, but I won't if you keep twisting my shoulder," she said.

"You've been too blasted lippy an' independent with me lately," Ryman rasped. "Some o' these days I'll break an' tame you like I have that wolf pup." But he released her, and at her father's order, she again related details of her meeting with the

two men, except that she did not mention the name of David Martin. That, she felt, might lead to the discovery that she had once talked with him without reporting it. Besides, there was nothing to be gained by it. She had turned Martin back. and he, at least, was safe.

"We'll keep our rifles by us, an' Betty will have to keep a close watch in the daytime," Ryman said. "When them fellers come we want to make sure that none of 'em gits away alive."

There was no sleep for Betty that night. Tragedy was surely stalking abroad. It threatened her as well as her parents, and she was convinced that no matter who won, Slug Ryman or Niles Dillard, she and her family would lose. Murder had once been committed on account of that gold according to Ryman, and the curse of that old crime still lingered.

If only there had been no gold there. If she could have taken Martin to her father with his proposition of partnership to build up the valley how different everything would have looked! She could only dream of that, however; knowing that it could never be a reality. But she was surprised that David Martin's image was always so clear in her imagination. And the mere thought of him caused strange stirrings within her that she could only dimly understand.

CHAPTER IV.

DISCOVERY.

THE three days that followed were tense ones. Clark and Ryman continued their work, but they apparently had seen the desirability of misleading any one who saw their ditch. They altered their plan to make it appear they were taking out a ditch for irrigating purposes. At the same time, Ryman made certain changes about their camp designed to give them an advantage if they should be attacked.

Betty was supposed to be watching for the enemy, but no one paid a great deal of attention to her in any other way. Her injured hand, which had gone so long without proper care, had taken another change for the worse. In the excitement and suspense of wondering what was going to happen next, the girl herself scarcely noticed it.

The fourth morning she mounted Brownie and rode away as usual in the direction from which Dillard might be expected to come. Somehow she believed the fellow would keep his word and not come until after the fourth day, and so when out of sight she turned her pony and rode through the timber until she was once more near the lower end of the valley, near the pinnacle.

She turned Brownie loose, and seating herself on a log, half debated with herself whether or not to make the climb to the top. She now carried her hand in a sling, and the dull, throbbing ache of it discouraged needless exercise, and she sat still.

Of a sudden she heard a stick crack, and springing up, her eyes widened at sight of David Martin smiling upon her from a distance of fifteen feet.

"Didn't mean to alarm you, Miss Clark," he said engagingly.

"What are you doin' back here?" she demanded, a strange sort of dryness in her throat.

He came forward, placed one foot on the log she had been sitting upon, and draped his gauntleted buckskin gloves across his knee with a smart snap.

"Well, I found out it was necessary," he told her cheerily. "You see, I went down to the land office in Fourbear to look over the records, an' I found there that my claims have never been contested; there have been no other filin's made on this valley, an' so my rights still stand. Naturally, I came back."

Betty was trying hard to think, but making little headway. All she could see was that his presence added one more complication to the dangerous situation that existed.

"What do you propose to do with us?" she asked.

"I don't know. Frankly, I want to have a talk with your father, or whoever is runnin' things here, an' find out what the idea is in locatin' here an' diggin' a ditch without filin' on either the land or the water. Do you suppose you could enlighten me?"

"I can tell you this," she said dully, "you'll be killed if you try to enter this valley."

"Golly! Are your folks as bad as all that?" he said whimsically. "You, at least, don't look so ferocious, but of course I know the Dillard——" He broke off abruptly and stared at her wounded hand.

"Say, that's a bad-lookin' hand you're carryin' there. What caused it?" he demanded.

"A wolf pup bit me," she informed.

"Here, let me see it," he ordered tersely, and before she could object he had taken it out of the sling and removed the unclean rag with which Mrs. Clark had bandaged the wound.

"Girl, this needs attention right now," he said sternly. "By rights you ought to have a doctor, but I suppose there ain't one nearer than Fourbear, an' that's ninety-five miles. But my pack horse is right back here a ways an' I can fix this up some myself. You come with me."

Betty wanted to protest, but some way she could not. Presently he was unpacking a pack horse.

"You haven't even washed this with an antiseptic," he charged.

"I wash it in soap and water, an' my mother puts mutton tallow salve on it, but we haven't anything else," Betty said.

"Hm-m-m—not so good," he said doubtfully. He poured water from a keg, built a small fire, and soon had the water boiling.

"Look here, I can't stay here, an' if they see the smoke——" Betty began to protest.

"Never mind all that. This hand has got to be dressed properly," he said with cold determination, and added carbolic acid to the water from a bottle among his things.

"You'll have to grit your teeth because I'm sure goin' to give that wound a cleanin' an' it'll hurt."

AND the cleansing operation did hurt before he was through with it. Several times he drew little exclamations of pain from the girl, but she endured valiantly. David perspired copiously in his efforts to be both gentle and thorough. After he was satisfied that the wound was thoroughly clean, he painted it with iodine, and then handed the two bottles over to her.

"You keep these an' take care of that wound every day till it gets well. If it should get worse you might make 'em take you to a doctor whether or no," he said firmly.

Betty rubbed her wet fingers over the iodine and discovered that the yellow stain could not be removed. Her eyes widened in fright.

"They—they'll see this, an' then

they'll know I've been talkin' to you," she breathed fearfully.

"Why not?" he asked quickly. "Why are you afraid your folks will know I'm here?" A romantic idea had entered his head. Perhaps this girl was herself a victim of the Dillard gang with which he knew he had to try conclusions sooner or later. Might he not rescue her from their clutches and then return to have it out with them? He realized fully that he would be under a decided handicap in the coming conflict if the girl were there in danger.

"I can't tell you, but please, please go away from here," she pleaded. "Come back next year. Then, I'm sure, we'll be gone."

"I don't want to come back after you are gone," he said earnestly. "Look here; I ain't so much in the dark about your people as you might suppose. This land belongs to me, an' I already have a cattle outfit trailing in here with a bunch of hard-bitten punchers. We'll fight for our rights, but you mustn't be here. You don't belong with such people. Leave them an' come with me. I'll take you to Fourbear, an'—an'—take care of you."

The girl had suddenly become cold. "I don't need anybody to take care of me, an' you'll find my folks will be able to take care of themselves if you try to run us out."

"You mean you won't leave these people?" David demanded, his tone, in turn, growing chilly.

"They're my own father an' mother—I certainly won't leave them."

David began repacking, and the girl watched him doubtfully. She was tempted to tell him that her folks had been threatened by other people also, but that was directly against orders and could, she thought, only serve to further complicate matters. And she resented his offer to take her away. Other men had offered to take her away from the life at a gyppo camp, and she understood the full meaning of their proposition. She was bitterly disappointed to think that he could hold the same thoughts.

At last he had his horse repacked, and he turned to the girl. "It would be foolish for me to go on in now, but when I come back I'll have men enough to establish our rights. You can take that message to the men in there. But I hope you'll influence your own folks to get away before that time."

He swung onto his horse, gave the leading rope on the pack horse a jerk, and for the second time Betty saw him ride the way he had come.

Presently, Betty walked slowly over to Brownie, and mounting him turned toward home. David Martin's unexpected return meant that something must be done. Regardless of the outcome of Niles Dillard's threats, her father and Ryman could no longer hope to carry on their mining operations in secrecy. She knew that she could never make her father understand it. Thoughts of gold had turned his mind, and he was completely under the influence of Ryman.

Only one hope of avoiding disaster remained. That was to see Ryman and make him see the folly of his undertaking.

BEFORE seeking Ryman, Betty found a bit of bandage to wrap loosely about her hand, and also carefully hid the two bottles which she had intended to give back to Martin, but had neglected to do so simply because she had forgotten it.

On her way out she passed the wagon wheel where the wolf pup

was tied. Despite the brutal treatment it had received, it had thrived under the ample food supply which Betty had contrived to give it. She spoke to the pup kindly, and though there was no wag of the tail, such as would have been expected from a dog, Danger got up and came toward her as far as his wire would permit.

Apparently the wolf had been half starved when Ryman found it. Now Betty was amazed to see how straight its wabbly legs had become. The hair was smoother, and the tiny, sharp teeth were grown stronger; less like needles, but conveying more menace.

Betty laid her hand gingerly on the wolf's head and petted it lightly. He made no effort to bite. She believed there was even a look of affection in its eyes.

"Poor little creature, I suppose you hadn't ought to be allowed to run at large, but I'm goin' to turn you loose anyway one of these days if things don't change," she crooned softly.

"You are, are you?" demanded a gruff voice. Unnoticed, Slug Ryman had been standing on the other side of the wagon.

Betty drew back fearfully, the wolf pup snarled viciously and withdrew under the wagon to escape the toe of a punishing cowhide boot.

"You'll turn nothin' loose, me gal," Ryman said. "You'd just as well understand that you're goin' to be my woman just as soon as we git this gold an' I find time to train you—mebbe before, if the notion so takes me, an' I'm feelin' about that way right now."

"I'll die first," Betty said defiantly. "An' you won't get this gold like you think, either," she added, anxious to get his mind on something besides herself.

"Won't I? What do you know about it?" He seized her roughly by the wrists. The end of the bandage she had wrapped loosely about her sore hand got between his fingers and he gave it a jerk which tore it away. The freshly dressed wound with the yellow iodine stain was revealed. The man stared at it unbelievingly.

"Where'd you git that iodine?" he demanded.

"None of your business. I got it," Betty said sullenly.

"You come with me," Ryman ordered, and dragged her over to the cabin by the other wrist.

"Mrs. Clark, you got any iodine in the camp?" he thundered.

"No," came the astonished reply.

"Had any lately?"

"I should say not."

"Know anything about where Betty got this?"

Mrs. Clark stared amazedly at her daughter's hand. "That ain't like I dressed it this mornin'!" she gasped.

"Come clean now," Ryman rasped. "Where'd you git that medicine, an' who dressed that hand for you?" His grip on her wrist tightened until she screamed with pain.

"Make her tell," Mrs. Clark urged, half hysterical herself.

"Oh, I'll tell—let me go," Betty surrenderd.

Ryman loosened his grasp, though he still maintained his hold on her. His lips twisted into a triumphant grin at this, his first victory over the girl.

"I got it from the man who built this cabin, an' who owns a lot of this valley," Betty said hurriedly. "He's gone back now to get a lot of men, an' he's comin' back to move us off."

"He is, eh?" Ryman queried sardonically.

"He is. And you're foolish to think you can dig gold here without other people knowin' about it."

"Did you tell him about the gold?" the man asked ominously.

"Of course not. What do you think I am?" Betty replied, but her voice trembled with the justified fear that he would not believe her. His sneering laugh was not reassuring.

"Well, you've disobeyed orders, an' you've prob'ly ruined our chances to make a fortune to make the best of it," he announced. "Hereafter, I'll discipline you myself, an' I'll see that you don't play us no more dirty tricks."

"Ryman, Betty is my daughter," Mrs. Clark reminded, at last convinced that he was going too far.

"That's all right, but she's goin' to be my woman, an' I'm in charge o' this camp—don't forgit that. My word is law around here," he retorted grimly.

Yet the man was obviously mentally upset, and his somewhat sluggish mind was undecided what to do. The cabin had two rooms, and he suddenly dragged the girl into the back room and threw her halfway across it.

"You stay there till I go up an' git your dad," he ordered. "Don't you dare let her move from that room," he added to Mrs. Clark.

"Mother, we must get away from here—away from that man at once," Betty urged frantically when Ryman had left.

"You keep still," her mother ordered. "Sometimes I'm afraid of him myself, but you had no business not tellin' us everythin' right away. Your father will have to decide."

In vain Betty argued, pleaded. She knew in advance how useless it would be to appeal to her father, and she knew now that there was only one way to save herself from Slug Ryman—and that was by flight. It was going to be hard to desert her parents, but she was sure that only destruction awaited them if they remained under the spell of Ryman and his story of gold.

She regretted intensely now that she had not made a clean breast of matters to David Martin and appealed to him for aid. Her only hope now was to escape as soon as possible, and make a belated appeal to him to come back.

CHAPTER V.

ESCAPE.

RYMAN had not been gone an hour until he was back with James Clark. The former contractor was furious at what he regarded as his daughter's perfidy in having dealings with the enemy.

"You'll behave yourself after this, miss," he ranted, and proceeded to lecture the girl until he was out of breath.

"The point is this," Ryman broke in finally. "Lettin' this feller git away means that we've got to postpone our minin' till we git rid of him, or them. I reckon he's in with them other fellers she saw the other day."

"He is not," Betty denied. "He owns this land."

"He won't own it long," Ryman said grimly. "There's been men killed here before an' there will be again. We'll hold this same as it was a ranch, an' then take out the gold later on."

Betty saw the spasm of disappointment that shot across her father's face. Visions of quick wealth had been too much for him.

"You may even have to go file

a claim o' some kind on this," Ryman said to Clark. "I reckon, though, that this is unsurveyed land an' we have a squatter's right where possession is nine points in the law. For the present we'll just keep a close watch an' go on with the ditch same's if nothin' had happened."

"An' Betty—what about her?" Mrs. Clark inquired humbly. At last some vague suspicion that the girl might be in danger seemed stirring within her, but she knew better than to openly oppose Ryman's decisions.

"She can't be trusted, an' I'll keep her by me—in the daytime," Ryman said with a leer. "I reckon you folks'll do well to see that she stays where she belongs at night." The man lighted his foul-smelling pipe and lumbered out.

"Betty, you got to be more careful," the girl's mother advised. "Ryman is all right when he ain't crossed, but if you make him mad I shudder to think what he might do."

"He's let me know plain enough what he intends to do," Betty said dully.

Mrs. Clark's eyes began to open, and for once it seemed that the glitter of gold did not blind her. But whatever she meant to say went unsaid. She turned to her husband and stopped his renewal of the lecture by curtly telling him to wash for supper. That sudden change was Betty's first breath of hope.

She slept in the back room where Ryman had ordered her to be kept prisoner, while her parents had their bed in the front room. Betty's inclination, after retiring, was to cry. With darkness everything seemed hopeless, and to it was added her terror that Niles Dillard and his own men might come now at any moment. Whatever the outcome of that might be, she felt that there was little hope for her or her parents. Yet, spurred on by a grim resolution, she choked back the sobs and listened for the sounds that would let her know when her parents were asleep.

It was a long time before her father's grumbling voice was silenced, and an hour more before she dared to move. The only way out was through the front room, and not only did she have to win past her parents, but there was the always present danger that Slug Ryman might hear her. If he did, she knew that she could expect no mercy from him.

At last, dressing herself as warmly as she could, she opened the partition door and crept out with her shoes in her hand. To her tremendous relief she got outside without difficulty, and stopped to put on her shoes and lace them. As she straightened up she very nearly emitted a shriek of terror at a white-clad figure before her. Then she realized that it was her mother, and the older woman's fingers were on her lips.

"Where you goin'?" Mrs. Clark queried in a husky, frightened whisper.

"I'm goin' away, mother—for help. Oh, mother, I can't stay here with that awful threat of Slug Ryman over me. Please, please, don't give me away."

"I—I—don't know, honey. Mebbe me an' James made a mistake. In the beginnin' at least we meant this gold mostly for you, but there was a man killed for it once, an' Ryman once served time as a convict. I'm afraid, Betty. I'm afraid it's all cursed, an' I'm afraid of Ryman."

"Mother, that's just why I must get away," Betty pleaded. "This man who dressed my hand, David

Martin, is honest. He'll help us. If I can get away I can find him an' he'll come back. Why, I'd sooner think he'd let us have some of that gold than Slug Ryman."

"But it's dark, an' you haven't a thing to defend yourself, honey. You'd git lost, an' then what would you do?"

"I'll take Brownie, an' I'll be all right," Betty promised, gaining confidence from her mother's very uncertainty.

"I'm afraid if you stay here, that —yes, go ahead. No, wait. I'll git you somethin' to take along."

CROUCHING in the shadow of the cabin, Betty waited nearly a quarter of an hour for her mother to reappear. Finally the older woman came out with a small sack of food, and pressed into her daughter's hand also a five-dollar bill and two silver dollars.

"All I could git, honey," she said. "Now you come back to mother just as soon as you can—when you git help."

It was hard for Betty to keep from breaking down altogether. The two women clung to each other for a moment and then Betty hurried away, fearful that one of the men might wake up and stop her.

Brownie raised his head and nickered as she approached the place where he was staked, causing the girl another momentary panic. The saddle had been left close to the tree to which the pony was staked, and the girl threw it on hurriedly and cinched it up. But not until she was a quarter of a mile from the cabin and galloping freely down the valley did she dare to breathe easily.

At that she was far from confident as she rode along. Once out of the valley the trail looked unfamiliar to her in the dim starlight. She had been over it only once, but she dared not tarry. There were other horses at the camp, and she felt certain that Ryman would pursue her some distance at least. Strange, eerie night noises gave her more than one start, but her life in a gyppo camp had given her self-reliance to a high degree. Neither the mountains nor the darkness in themselves held any terror for her, but she knew that there were human enemies around, and there was always the probability that she might encounter some of them.

Daylight found her well along, and to her relief she recognized a landmark almost at once. As yet she was on the right way. But how soon would David Martin leave this trail? How far was he ahead of her? Another thirty miles and she would be out of the worst of the mountains, but then she would have no idea which way to go. He had mentioned the town of Fourbear, but she knew there was small chance that his outfit was coming from there. Yet anything seemed better than remaining in the clutches of Slug Ryman.

She rode on for another three hours, crowding Brownie to his best speed, and pausing only when she noticed that the pony was badly winded. She had hoped in that last desperate ride to come up with David, or to at least find where he had camped for the night, but there was no sign of him.

While Brownie grazed and rested, she ate a cold breakfast from the supply her mother had given her. There was only enough left for another meal she noted sadly, but that was not her mother's fault. It was all there was in the house, and there had certainly been no opportunity to provide more. She was thankful for even that much, but Fourbear,

she knew, was at least eighty miles away, and she knew of no closer settlement. She could not blind herself to the fact that her situation was full of peril unless she could find friends some way.

It was late in the afternoon, and after she had despaired of overtaking David, that she rode unexpectedly upon two men who had stopped by a small spring to rest their horses. She could not have avoided them if she would, and she rode up to them boldly. They got to their feet and stared at her with lively curiosity. Both men were strangers to her.

"I am lookin' for David Martin's outfit," she stated evenly. "Could you men tell me anything at all about it?"

The men exchanged glances. "Sure we can," one of them replied. "Do you know David?"

"Yes. He was up in—in Gold Valley yesterday, and I have been tryin' to overtake him."

Again the men exchanged significant glances.

"You ain't far behind him at that," the same speaker said. "Too bad you just missed him, but it's only about twelve miles to camp, an' we'll show you the way."

"Oh, do you men work for him?" Betty asked eagerly.

"Certain, sure," and both men laughed.

They left the main trail at once, and at the end of nearly two hours' hard riding they suddenly rode into a perfectly concealed camp. It was still light enough to distinguish faces. A fire was going, and one man was cooking supper while four others lounged about comfortably. At their approach one man got up and came forward. To Betty's horror that man was Niles Dillard.

NILES DILLARD was as surprised as Betty, but a significant glance from one of the men who had guided her reassured him while it brought greater terror to the girl.

"Well, well, if this ain't the purty nester girl from the mountains." Dillard smiled. "Delighted to have you call on us. Git off an' make yourself at home. Supper will be ready in a few minutes."

"Your men told me this was David Martin's camp," the girl said in a curiously dry, strained voice.

"Well, miss, they didn't exactly lie about it. You see we fully intend to join Martin's outfit either to-day or next day." The words were reassuring, but his sardonic tone and manner was not.

"How far is it to his camp?" she asked.

"How far is it to Martin's camp, Clay?" Dillard questioned of a pockmarked giant who was an interested listener.

" 'Bout twenty-five miles," was the reply.

"Which way is it?" Betty demanded.

"Thinkin' o' goin' on there tonight?" Clay asked.

"I certainly am."

The men all laughed uproariously as at a good joke. The chinless man who had been with Dillard came forward and put his hand on her. The next moment Niles Dillard struck the fellow's arm down viciously.

"None o' that, Dutch," he snarled, and the chinless man slunk into the background.

"You'll have to stay here tonight, miss; but you don't need to worry because nobody is goin' to bother you," Dillard said. "I reckon you don't know the straight of things up here, so I'll enlighten you. We, me an' my friends, have

got business up here in these mountains, an' we don't want any cattle outfits or settlers comin' in, see?

"Now Martin has sort of challenged us by comin' in an' buildin' him that cabin an' filin' on a homestead an' a desert claim up there, an' then sendin' you folks up there to develop it for him while he brings up his cattle. The truth is we ain't agoin' to let them cattle come in."

"You said you was goin' to chase us out, too, but you haven't done it," Betty retorted.

"I gave you four days, but I meant more. You see I figgered you'd send word to Martin, which is why I had Gordon an' Curly watch the trail. When they seen Martin go in we figgered he'd make a play to fight us up there, which is why we're down here. When he takes his riders an' goes back up there in a hurry we play a little game with his cattle. See how easy it's goin' to be for us?"

Betty was stunned by this revelation. Dillard and his men were laboring under a false impression, but she saw clearly enough that it did not lessen the danger of her own people, though it included David Martin as well.

At the same time she comprehended that Dillard was making a grave mistake. David was not going to take his men into the mountains and leave his cattle at the mercy of these men whom she now knew to be outlaws. The Dillard gang was due for a surprise there. At this conclusion it also dawned upon her that had she been successful in overtaking David the outlaws' plans would have worked perfectly.

Now, she thought, if she could only find David Martin with her news he would be able to foil the outlaws, and then take care of Slug Ryman. But the very fact that Niles Dillard had spoken so frankly indicated clearly that he did not intend to let her go on.

"You are outlaws," she charged suddenly. "I won't stay here." She touched Brownie with the spurs, but as she expected the reins were gripped by strong hands.

"Sorry, but we'll have to keep you with us, unless you can give some good reason why we should let you go," Dillard said, and his men snickered.

The girl's eyes dropped and chanced to rest upon her sore hand. It gave her an idea.

"I've got blood poison in my hand, an' I've got to get out to Fourbear an' find a doctor," she said plaintively.

Dillard stared at her hand with manifest unbelief, but when she unwrapped the bandage and displayed the wound he was more than half convinced.

"Hell!" he swore heartily. Outlaw leader that he was he had scarcely the heart to keep a person from the doctor when the consequences were so dangerous as this.

"Well, you'll have to stay here to-night, at any rate," he growled. "Git off an' let me see what I can do for that hand."

Betty had no option but to obey. While Dillard dressed her hand with almost as much skill as David Martin had shown, she saw Brownie unsaddled and taken away to the outlaws' horses.

"I can tell better about this hand in daylight," Dillard said. The girl noted that he was inclined to show her much more consideration on account of the wound than he would have done otherwise.

Once she overheard him remark to Clay, "Took a lot of nerve for that girl to start on a ride of that kind by herself."

"But she was huntin' for Martin —don't forgit that," Clay retorted.

DESPITE her anxiety, Betty managed to eat the not-badly-cooked food that was offered her. Later Dillard ordered two of the men to set up a small tepee tent which they had along but were not using. They made a bed for her in the tepee, and she retired with the assurances of Dillard that she would be unmolested. Being exhausted from her long ride she soon fell asleep.

She was awakened by the men stirring about the fire outside. It was scarcely more than daylight, and as she felt so utterly in their power she decided to stay where she was until they called her out. By the clatter of tin dishes she presently knew they were having breakfast, and later she heard them saddling up, and some of them rode away.

Getting to her knees, she pushed the canvas aside lightly and peered out. Was it possible that there could be a chance to sneak away while they were not looking. That hope was doomed to immediate disappointment as she saw the man Gordon hunkered down a few yards away. He, obviously, had been left on guard.

A few minutes later she saw Dillard himself coming toward the tent, and getting to her feet and making herself as presentable as she could she stepped out to meet him.

"Go down to the creek there if you want to wash," he said curtly, and tossed her a towel and a bar of soap.

The creek was heavily lined with brush and small timber. The girl was quickly out of sight of the camp, and the temptation to make a dash for freedom was almost overpowering. For a moment she was poised like a young deer, ready for flight, but the futility of it impinged upon her brain before she did anything rash. Alone, and on foot, in a mountain wilderness, miles from any one who could help her, she sensed it would be useless. And she was sure that Dillard would quickly follow and overtake her if she did not quickly return.

The cold, mountain water freshened and invigorated her immensely. She thought that Dillard gave her a faint glance of approval when she came back.

"Eat your breakfast, an' I'll have another look at that hand," he said.

After she had eaten she was able to face the outlaw chief with a degree of confidence. He dressed the wound thoroughly with only a word or two of comment until he had finished.

"It's got to be taken care of, but there's no blood poison yet," he said judicially. "As soon as I git a little time I'll take you to a doctor—if it still needs it—but right now you'll have to content yourself right here."

"And if I don't?" Betty queried evenly.

"I can spare Gordon here to watch you," Dillard said, watching her closely.

The thought of being left alone with any of the outlaws, saving possibly Dillard himself, was terrifying to the girl. Dillard seemed to read her mind.

"If you'll give me your word not to leave here you'll be left alone. It wouldn't be anything but suicide for you to try to leave anyway, because we ain't leavin' no horses. Will you give it?"

Betty was silent a moment; then she said, "Yes, I'll promise."

Half an hour later she was left

alone. Her first care was to verify Dillard's statement that no horses would be left. In dumb misery she sat down. She knew well enough that she could not leave the place even if she had not given her word. She might walk back to the place where she had encountered the two outlaws, but she could never make it back to the mountain valley on foot, nor could she hope to reach Fourbear. And she had no idea where David Martin's camp might be. There was nothing to do but content herself as best she could, as Niles Dillard had advised. She knew that if she once gave way to panic she would be done for.

But there was the always present fear that some of the outlaws might take it into their heads to sneak back. There was the worry about her folks, and now a strong fear that something might happen to David Martin.

The day dragged by monotonously. Because she had nothing else to do, she built a fire and cooked herself a dinner which she did not eat. Always there was the temptation to run away, but always her common sense was strong enough to overcome it. To run would be foolish and perhaps fatal, but if she stayed, there was a chance that when she did escape it would be with some probability of success. She might at least get a horse, and some way she believed that Niles Dillard would not let any real harm come to her, for a while, at least.

An hour before sunset she heard some one coming, and withdrew into her tent. Two men rode up, and when she recognized them it was too late for her to leave the tent. Again a terror that was purely physical gripped her. One of the men was Dutch, the chinless associate of Niles Dillard, but he was obviously a prisoner of Slug Ryman—and in mortal fear of his life.

"Now, yuh blasted skunk, if the gal ain't here I'm goin' to wring your neck like a chicken—an' it'd serve you damn well for tryin' to make a prisoner outta me," Ryman said hoarsely.

The man was nearly insane with rage, and Betty realized that she was likely to see murder committed on the spot if she did not show herself.

CHAPTER VI.

OUTLAWS RIDE.

OUTWARDLY calm, but inwardly quaking, Betty stepped out of the tent. Ryman was actually surprised to see her, and his jaw dropped for a moment before clutching at the perpetual pipe.

"So you are here, huh?" he snarled.

Betty glanced about swiftly and nervously. If only more of the outlaws would return—if only she could find some weapon to defend herself. Death, anything, was preferable to falling into the hands of Ryman now.

A few feet away she saw a long, sharp butcher knife where she herself had placed it after washing the dishes. With a sudden, swift bound she had it in her hand. Ryman gave an ugly laugh.

"Think yuh can hurt me with that?" he sneered, and began to dismount.

"I can at least kill myself before I let you touch me," Betty panted as she began warily to retreat.

Ryman swung to the ground and slowly began to advance. Betty gave an appealing glance at Dutch, but that outlaw was thoroughly cowed by the man he had attempted to make a prisoner. Then she con-

tinued to move backward, but there was strategy in her quick movements.

Though she perhaps had the courage to use the knife on herself as a last resort, she was too much of a fighter to give in easily, and if she could only keep out of the way of Slug Ryman she meant first to try to use the knife on him. But as she retreated she moved in a circle around the outlaws' camp. She was aware that Ryman was gradually getting closer to her since he could move faster forward than she could backward. And she knew that the moment she turned her back to him he would quickly overtake her. His lips were parted in an evil grin. He believed she was bluffing with the knife, but he preferred to move carefully rather than take chances.

She seized the reins with her well hand, and without troubling to divide them over the horse's head, reached for the saddle horn with the same hand. Her toe touched the stirrup, and she scrambled into the saddle as she saw Ryman plunging toward her a few feet away. Things were happening almost too fast for her to follow, but she saw blood trickling down the man's wrist from his forearm as she pulled on the reins and implored the sorrel horse to start.

Then Dutch, in an effort to get out of the way, spun his horse to the right and Ryman collided violently with it. The big ex-convict was off balance and he went sprawling for six feet to come down on his hands and knees.

Betty had the sorrel horse on a run before Ryman regained his feet. Her heart was in her mouth as she saw him start to draw his gun. Then he changed his mind, dragged Dutch from his saddle, and climbed onto the outlaw's horse.

The girl realized it was to be a desperate chase. She had no chance to choose her course, and now she realized that she was going in a directly opposite way from the one she had come in on. She could do no more than take the best route that opened before her.

Fortunately for her, Ryman was clumsy on his feet, and it required some little time for him to mount the strange horse. Being a much larger man than the outlaw he had dispossessed, the stirrups were much too short for him. Neither was he anywhere near as good a rider as the girl. Betty pushed her toes into the stirrup leathers at the top of the stirrups and found them to be about the right length. Then she gave all her attention to guiding her mount through the timber.

Much of the time she was out of sight of her pursuer, and the sorrel workhorse with her lighter weight seemed capable of holding his lead indefinitely, unless she should come against some unexpected obstacle which would make her turn back. She leaned ahead and scanned the way ahead of her with painful concentration. Several times she narrowly avoided riding into some blind pocket from which it would have been impossible to escape.

Twice Ryman fired shots which went overhead, his intention being, she guessed, to scare her rather than hurt her. She lost all sense of direction soon after the sun went down, and could only hope that with the approach of darkness the man would give up the pursuit. It seemed to her that it would never get dark, and when it did begin to get that way she found her danger of getting into a cul-de-sac increased.

Then, plunging wildly down a steep, timber-covered slope, the sorrel horse, no longer as supple in the

legs as he had been in his youth, stumbled and fell. The girl crashed to the ground with terrific force and lay there unconscious.

THE sorrel horse scrambled to its feet and still in terror of whatever was behind, raced on, while Ryman, guided by the sound of the horse's flight rather than by sight, swept on by in pursuit without having seen the fall, or the girl who at one time was not twenty feet from his horse's hoofs.

At the bottom of the slope was a deep, narrow canyon down which the sorrel horse turned. Two miles or so farther down, Ryman overhauled the animal and discovered the empty saddle. The man cursed loud and furiously, and the pain from a throbbing, though not serious, knife cut in his forearm did not conduce to a milder temper.

It was thoroughly dark by this time, especially in the shadows of the timber. To search for the girl now was out of the question. When he had relieved his feelings somewhat by an orgy of cursing, the big criminal began to think more collectedly.

There had never been a doubt in his mind that he would be able to work his will with the girl whenever he got ready. He had delayed, partly because he did not wish to spoil the pleasure of anticipation, and partly because he needed the help of the Clarks to get the gold he desired. He would have been perfectly willing to murder the girl's parents if it became necessary, but he had cherished no such thoughts for them. His reaction toward them was indeed one of easy contempt. When it was all over he meant to give them as much of the gold as he thought they ought to have, and then marry their daughter.

Betty's dislike of him had afforded only a perverse sort of pleasure until his discovery that she was in communication with outside people. That had made him angry, but when he awakened to find that she had fled the valley in the night he had become insanely furious. He had knocked James Clark down, and threatened his wife before catching a horse and starting in search of Betty. He had ridden for several hours before the thought occurred to him that he had been fooled by a girl's whimsy—that she would never dare to go away alone. He had returned confidently expecting to find her back home. Convinced again that she had indeed gone, he had taken up the trail with even more anger than before.

He had been obliged to camp for the night before finding any sign of her, and the next day he had suddenly been held up by the man Dutch, who had been sent out to the trail to watch for David Martin. Believing that Ryman was only a farmer or ranch hand employed by Martin, Dutch had no hesitancy about stopping him. The outlaw had given the command to halt with a grin, and with no other idea than having a little fun with his victim while he made him give up valuable information.

After half an hour of this baiting, Dutch had found himself a very much surprised outlaw when the huge, swarthy man had suddenly leaped upon him recklessly and knocked the gun from his hand before he could use it, and then shaken him until his teeth rattled. Under pressure of the massive fingers of the man, Dutch had admitted that he knew where the girl was, and made the further admission that he was a member of the Dillard gang of outlaws.

The last had been good news to Ryman. If it was only a gang of outlaws he had to contend with, he did not worry greatly. He could settle the question of possession of the valley with them, and then go ahead with his work. He had completely terrorized the chinless Dutch, and the fellow had not dared to misguide him to the outlaw camp. Ryman had been a little afraid that he might be led into a trap, but he had made it so clear to Dutch that he would surely die at the first sign of treachery that he had approached without fear. And with his supreme confidence in his own ability, fear was really foreign to his nature.

Then Betty had daringly and unexpectedly managed to elude him. Now as he stood and cursed, he had no other thought than that the girl had jumped from the horse in the shelter of the darkness and was hiding in the timber near by. But he had the good sense to know that he stood no chance of finding her until morning.

By this time the outlaw he had conquered would probably have communicated with his fellows, and if Betty had told them of the gold, and he believed that she had, there was danger that they might get to the valley ahead of him. He could never permit that. If he had to choose between the gold and the girl, he would take the gold.

He roared the girl's name a few times, and added the advice that she would surely die in the mountains if he left her alone, but of course there was no reply. And after an erratic search, he mounted the sorrel horse, and leading the other one, set out to find his way back to the main trail, at the same time steering clear of the outlaw camp. The girl he would have to leave to the mercies of nature or the Dillard gang if any of them happened to pick her up.

It was several hours before Betty regained consciousness. At first she was conscious only of a sharply aching head, and did not realize where she was nor what had happened. But gradually memory was restored to her. She experienced a spasm of fear that Slug Ryman might find her at any moment and she crouched breathless. Then, as the abysmal silence convinced her that she was alone, she realized that considerable time must have passed since her fall. As yet she was very unclear about most things in the immediate past. Ryman had been chasing her, but she could not locate herself. The time spent at the outlaw camp seemed as unreal as a dream. The only thing to do was bide her time until daybreak, and that seemed a fearfully long time in coming.

ALL day a herd of range cattle, nearly two thousand in number, had been moving steadily forward under the guidance of eight riders, with a cook and a horse wrangler to boot. Everything that David Martin owned was tied up in that herd of cattle.

Son of an old-time cattleman, he had, upon his father's death, found himself holding the title to a mortgaged ranch, and some cattle on a range that was decreasing so fast that its total disappearance was a matter of only a few years.

Realizing his inability to pay out on the property as it then stood, David had gone in search of a new home. The memory of a former deer hunt in the Shoshone Mountains had taken him to the mountain valley where he had exercised his homestead and desert right. There, he felt confident, a future cattle

ranch with unlimited range could be established.

Returning to his home in the fall, he had at once proceeded to close out his holdings there with the exception of the cattle. Starting north early in the spring, his cash resources had been pitifully small, about enough, in fact, to pay his men the remainder of the season.

He was aware that he could not put up hay enough that summer to feed his stock through the winter, but there was a great, open desert to the southward where he could manage to pull through, provided he could get the cattle fat before fall. That he had confidently expected to do with the virgin grass of his mountain valley. He had had his misgivings concerning the Dillard gang of outlaws, but he had not believed it possible for them to go so far as to jump his claims until he had reached the valley in advance of his men and found other people in possession there. And upon finding out that those trespassers had no shadow of legal right there, he would have taken steps to have them ousted at once had it not been for one thing—the girl he had met there.

It was a hope that he might yet avoid trouble which had taken him there the second time, but his interview with Betty had convinced him that it was useless to hope for compromise. He had returned to his trail herd with the determination of going in as quickly as possible with his entire crew and having it out with his opponents once for all. But knowing the tactics of the Dillard gang as he did, he was not leaving his cattle unprotected as Niles Dillard surmised he would do.

Neither was he expecting immediate attack. Yet all that day, the slowly moving herd of cattle was under surveillance of furtive riders, who kept carefully out of sight and from time to time reported to Niles Dillard.

The reports of these men, and the failure of the man Dutch to report, had made it certain to Dillard that he had guessed wrong. Martin, for some reason, was leaving the settlers in the valley to take care of themselves. With only a couple of men left with the cattle it would have been an easy matter to handle the men and remove the cattle where Martin would have a hard time finding them. In fact, Dillard planned that when Martin found his cows and calves, the stronger stuff of the herd, the steers and dry stuff would be disposed of. It would be a blow from which Martin could not easily recover.

But a full crew of ten men, reasonably alert, discouraged the kind of foray Dillard had planned. It required a change of campaign. The midnight raid he had intended might be successful, but it would certainly be dangerous.

With one man left to try to spy upon the camp of the cattlemen, Dillard and the other four waited at their rendezvous for word from which they now expected little.

The sudden arrival of Dutch in great agitation told them plainly that something out of the way had happened. Hurriedly the man told of his adventure with Ryman, and the subsequent disappearance of Ryman and the girl. The man had to submit to a severe grilling before Dillard would swallow the yarn.

"An' you don't know whether the girl got away or not?" Dillard demanded in a tone that betrayed his secret disappointment. The man was not a monster, but he, too, had been strangely stirred by the girl

who had been brought to his camp, and he had nourished hopes.

"I don't know, but I couldn't see a chance for her to dodge that big feller," Dutch said truthfully. "But there's one thing you're all wrong on. Them people up there don't know a thing about Martin. The big guy was plumb stumped when I tried to pump him about Martin. On the other hand after he bowled me over he tried to find out if the girl had given something away about what was really doin' up there."

Niles Dillard asked a few more pointed questions, and then lapsed into a thoughtful silence. He was a real leader, and his men waited respectfully for him to declare himself.

"Did any of you ever hear of a lost gold mine here in the mountains?" Dillard suddenly asked.

"There was a yarn," Clay said presently, "about four deserters from the army havin' killed a man over a gold find up here, but I never took much stock in it."

"But the story was that the deserters were arrested an' sent up for life—I've heard it from old-timers," Gordon spoke up.

"I've heard the same thing," Dillard said slowly. "I'm half inclined to believe Dutch is right. That girl was lyin' to us about goin' out to find a doctor. She didn't have blood poison, an' her hand had been well dressed. But everything indicates that she was runnin' away. Now if this big fellow was afraid she'd give somethin' away that they was doin' up there, an' was as desperate as Dutch says he was, they've got somethin' up there besides a nester's claim."

"You don't suppose——" Gordon said tremulously.

"I don't suppose a blasted thing, but since there ain't much chance of doin' anythin' with Martin right now, I say we'll ride up to that valley an' find out what it's all about," Dillard declared crisply.

CHAPTER VII.

MENACE IN THE VALLEY.

IT was ten o'clock the next day when the point men of the Martin herd gazed in astonishment at the figure of a girl weaving toward them down the side of a high ridge. Sometimes she would trip and fall; other times she would recover herself by grasping a bush or the low-swinging limb of a tree, but she was patently on the verge of exhaustion.

"Hold the cattle to the left—don't let 'em get scared an' stampede," David Martin called to the other point man, and touching his horse with the spurs, he urged the animal up the side of the ridge at a pace that quickly took its wind, but which brought him to the side of the exhausted girl before she completely collapsed.

He was almost up to her before he recognized her. "Great Judas, Miss Clark! What are you doin' here?" he exclaimed as he flung himself from the saddle and caught her in his arms.

"I—I started out to find you," she gasped.

"In these mountains?" He refrained from saying that it was a crazy thing to do, but he thought it. The wonder of it all was that she had succeeded.

"I had to. I had to have help, or——"

"Why didn't you tell me when I was up there?" he demanded. And then, feeling infinite pity for her, he began to apologize; but before he could finish a sentence she had fainted in his arms.

Picking up the girl he began the descent of the hill to where his men were already curiously gathered. One of them he dispatched in a hurry for water, while he proceeded to try to revive the girl. Betty opened her eyes before the man returned, and presently to the vast relief of the cowboys, she grinned.

"How did you get here, Miss Clark, an' where is your horse?" David asked kindly.

"I've had a time," Betty confessed. "First I met two fellows who told me they were your men an' would take me to your camp. Instead of that they took me to an outlaw camp."

"Near here?" a cowboy interrupted.

"Not many miles from here. I—I had to promise Niles Dillard that I wouldn't leave, an' I was afraid to on foot. Then Slug Ryman came. I managed to get on his horse, but he chased me for miles on another outlaw's horse till it got dark. My horse fell an' knocked me unconscious. It was way in the night when I came to. I waited till daylight an' then I started out. I was afraid I wouldn't find anybody," the girl explained lucidly enough, though her talk brought little understanding to her hearers.

"Why, you poor little cuss, you," David murmured, and unconsciously tightened the grasp he had maintained around her shoulder. Equally unconsciously the girl sighed and still further relaxed.

A moment later, however, Betty sat sharply and tensely erect, and the strained look came back in her eyes. "Ryman must have gone back to the valley, an' I'm afraid now he'll murder my folks. Please come back with me, an' help."

"Sure we'll help you," David said gently. "But first you've got to have some care, an' then you can tell us more about it. You see we ain't able to follow you. We don't know this Ryman person, an' I was under the illusion that Niles Dillard was the man who had planted you folks up there."

"No, no," Betty objected with widened eyes. "We——"

"Not just now," David cut in. "Buck, go overhaul the cook an' have him cook up something right now. We'll be along purty quick."

He assisted the girl into his saddle and then climbed on behind her. The other men went back to the cattle and David guided the horse slowly to where the camp was supposed to be, a mile or so ahead.

They found the cook, a baldheaded man of forty by name of Bond, already cooking dinner while "Buck" assisted lightly and talked more. Buck was quite unable to get over the unexpected appearance of a girl, and he stopped talking to stare at her as David lifted her from the saddle.

But Betty had not waited for food and rest before telling her story. On the way in she had explained to David Martin the exact details of her family's movements from the time they had first become acquainted with Ryman.

"An' to think that I made the mistake of thinkin' you belonged to that outlaw gang," David said miserably.

"I'm ashamed that I didn't tell you everything as soon as I learned that you had the best right in there. But I was afraid."

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes-s," she admitted, and he felt a quiet thrill of pleasure.

"This Ryman must be a blasted brute, but I reckon we'll dehorn him before we get through," he promised.

BUT the details of the operation were not so easy to work out. The news that the Dillard gang was camped in the immediate vicinity of his cattle and were planning a raid on them was disquieting. On the other hand he realized that the girl's fears for her parents' safety were justified when dealing with a man of Ryman's character.

And he was thrilled, too, by the knowledge that there was gold close to the cabin he had built; possibly it was upon his own land. If Ryman had discovered it then it belonged to Ryman, subject, of course, to any arrangements the fellow might have made with the Clarks; unless there were other sufficient reasons why Ryman was not entitled to it.

After dinner had been served to those present, David persuaded the girl to lie down and rest. Then he sent Buck back to the cattle with word for part of the boys to come in and eat, and then relieve the rest. Under the circumstances it was not safe to leave the cattle unguarded for a minute. Meanwhile the horse wrangler had brought in the cavvy, and David caught his own best horse, and another good horse for Betty.

"There's liable to be serious trouble with this Dillard gang," he told his men. "They want our cattle, but more than anything they want to keep us out of that valley I located up there. With a law-abidin' outfit up there these mountains won't be safe for 'em any longer. We've got to figger on a fight."

"We understood all that befo'," drawled Nate Jennison, the foreman.

"We can't leave the cattle, but somebody has got to go on to the valley. There's people up there who are in danger."

He gave them some history of the valley, without, however, mentioning the gold. There was none of his men that he could not trust, but he felt that they would all be better for the business in hand if they knew nothing of it.

"The way it strikes me is that there's more danger up there than there is here," Nate stated judicially. " 'Cordin' to this girl's story, they figgered on most of us goin' up there an' then raidin' what was left. They know we ain't gone, which is why we been let alone. Whoever goes up there will likely meet up with 'em."

"An' if we take most of the crew up there they'll find it out an' make their raid here anyway," David asserted.

In the end it was decided that David and Buck Powell should accompany the girl back to the valley, while the others brought the cattle as fast as possible.

With a good horse under each of them, and two pack horses with beds and supplies, the three set out as soon as Betty was deemed able to travel, she herself doing the deciding. But in spite of her eagerness and determination she was glad to make an early camp and take a long rest that night.

She was touched by the consideration shown her by the two men. Niles Dillard had treated her well enough in a way, but he had let her know that he was master, and such treatment as she received was by way of concession only. That, in fact, was the kind of treatment she was used to getting at home. But both David and Buck treated her as an equal. Any display of forced gallantry would have been distasteful to her, but they provided for her wants because they were better able to do it than she was, and they con-

sidered her the one most vitally interested in a dangerous undertaking.

They were on the trail early the next morning, and thanks to the night's rest, Betty felt as capable as ever. In spite of her recent misadventures her hand was much better. David had offered her an extra six-gun which the outfit carried, but she had declined the offer with the statement that the only weapon she knew how to use was a rifle. They had stowed the extra six-guns away in one of the bed rolls and a rifle under her stirrup leathers.

"You might need it, you know," Buck told her with a skeptical grin.

The sun had dropped behind the horizon before they reached the mountain valley, but they kept on, riding single file, until they reached the top of a low divide and saw the valley stretching away vaguely before them.

Betty tried vainly to conceal her agitation. "I—I'm afraid," she murmured. "Ryman would kill my folks, I know, unless he thought they might be useful to him."

"That's just it," David said with assumed cheerfulness. "We know he can't get along without 'em, so they'll be safe."

He was by no means so certain in his own mind. Both Ryman and the outlaws had had time to reach the valley long before. Anything might have happened in that time, especially where gold was the stake.

"We'll have to make a dry camp to-night, an' then I'll ride in an' see what I can find out," he said presently.

"I'll go with you," Betty insisted, and he could not change her mind.

"Then there ain't a bit o' sense in me bein' left behind," Buck contended, and so the three of them continued their ride along the edge of the valley. They stopped once to leave their pack horses in a well-concealed place, and when within half a mile of the cabin they left their saddle horses and Buck, much to that individual's disgust.

Slowly and carefully David and Betty advanced toward the cabin over ground every foot of which was familiar to both of them.

They had covered about half the distance when the sound of a woman's scream at the cabin brought them sharply to attention.

SLUG RYMAN had returned to the cabin in a murderous mood. He was convinced that Betty could not have got away in the first place without the connivance of her parents. That meant that they intended to double-cross him some way. He believed that the man who had dressed the girl's hand was primarily responsible. Doubtless the fellow had convinced Betty that they would be driven out, and would get nothing unless they made terms with him, and then Betty in turn had convinced her parents.

He knew well enough that his hold over the Clarks would be gone if they ever found out that the proper thing to do was to file a claim on the gold bar. There was his handicap. A gold rush would bring officers, and that meant that he must leave. One thing alone now gave him hope. He had guessed that the man who had conducted him to Betty was also an outlaw. If she had inadvertently fallen into the hands of an outlaw gang they would see to it that there was no filing done. Therefore, before dealing drastically with the Clarks he decided to wait for the other people to show their hand.

However, the look on his face showed little of this restraint when

he strode into the cabin upon his return. It was after dark, but the Clarks had not gone to bed. As he threw open the door the man and woman inside cowered back in fear, though they had been expecting him, and Clark laid his rifle across his knees.

"Did you find her, Ryman?" Mrs. Clark quavered.

"I did," Ryman replied harshly.

"Wh—where is she?"

"Where she won't be tryin' no more funny work again," the fellow laughed brutally, content to let them think what they would of his statement.

Mrs. Clark gave a low moan and sank to a bench, covering her face with her apron. Clark seemed dazed, unable to comprehend.

"She'd overtook them people she talked with before I found her, an' I reckon told 'em about the gold here," Ryman stated. "However, I learned that they're outlaws, so they'll only try to run us off."

"Ryman, my wife tells me that you made it so our girl had to leave," Clark spoke up thickly. "Now are you tellin' me you've murdered her?"

"You can think what you damned please," Ryman rasped. "You people will do just what I say at all times or I'll sure bump you off."

Suddenly Mrs. Clark threw her apron from her face and darted across the floor, screeching incoherently and clawing at the enemy. James got to his feet, fumbling with his rifle.

Ryman seized the maddened woman and swung her easily between himself and her husband. Clark dared not shoot, and in a moment Ryman grabbed the rifle by the barrel and jerked it out of his hands. He jammed the woman down upon a chair, and reversing the rifle stuck the butt against Clark's chest and sent him spinning against the partition wall.

"Listen": the man said harshly. "I could kill you both easy as not, an' it's up to you whether I do or not. Are you goin' to take my orders, help me whip them outlaws when they come, git some o' that gold for yourselves, or shall I finish you off right here?"

They implicitly believed that he meant exactly what he said, and, too, Clark's disordered mind still was lured by the mention of gold.

"We never meant you no harm, Ryman. Betty sneaked out while we was asleep. We'll do what you say," Clark promised.

"What about you?" Ryman demanded of the woman, the only one he feared.

"We're helpless—we gotta do what you want," she said sulkily.

"All right. To-morrow we'll move out o' here. But try no runnin' out on me before that time, because I'll be expectin' it," Ryman declared, and slouched out, taking Clark's rifle with him.

THE Clarks spent a miserable night; not daring to move for fear of Ryman, and each blaming the other for the plight they were in, and for the fate which they believed had overtaken Betty.

"I mean to kill him the first time I git a chance," Mrs. Clark declared dully. "I'll do that much for Betty."

"Woman, you're a fool. He's too much for us, but once we git this gold we'll report him to the law an' he'll hang," James said.

"You're the one that's crazy—you an' your gold! Think he'll let us git out of this alive, let alone havin' any gold, after what he's done?" his wife retorted.

"I don't know, I don't know," James droned. "The gold—we gotta think o' that first of all. But I'll watch him."

Ryman came before daybreak, demanding that breakfast be cooked. When it was over they began preparations to move, the Clarks not daring to ask any questions as to where they were going, or why.

Under his direction they loaded the wagon which they used to haul their tools about, with bedding and a week's supply of food, and then Ryman made them drive it over the ridge to where they intended to divert the water into the uncompleted ditch. This being as far as they could take the wagon, they carried the supplies on their backs a considerable distance up the creek through a dense thicket of small trees and brush to an open space only large enough to contain their things and give them room to walk about them. Then, for the first time, he deigned to tell them what it was all about.

"We gotta fool them people when they come—make 'em think I ain't got back yet. You people will continue to live in the cabin, and I camp up here. When they come you won't make any resistance, but you'll tell 'em when they ask that you're huntin' for gold all right. You'll tell 'em that this ditch is just a bluff, an' that the gold is here where we mean to put in the dam. That'll bring 'em up here in a hurry, an' as you know there's a lot o' dynamite planted here to shoot this rock across the creek. When they git here I'll be watchin' an' blow 'em to hell."

"You expect us to help you murder——" James began, but paused as his wife nudged him vigorously in the ribs.

"It's our only chance to git any of that gold, an' that's all that's left to us now," Mrs. Clark said earnestly.

"The gold. Yes, we've got to have that gold," Clark declared.

Ryman smiled grimly as he listened to their talk. He could almost guess at their conversation as they drove back to the cabin. Mrs. Clark, he knew, contemplated treachery. Their usefulness to him was about at an end. It would be hard to wash out the bar alone, but it could be managed some way if he could not get other help. The immediate problem was to deal with these men whom Betty had encountered. And that, he felt, could be handled very nicely. Long before he had planted dynamite under the cabin, with a thin, concealed wire leading from it to an equally concealed battery hid in the brush a few hundred feet distant.

If he knew human nature at all, and he prided himself he did, there would first be a conference in the cabin between the Clarks and the other people. A simple touch of a button and that crowd would trouble him no more.

He followed the Clarks almost back to the cabin, and stationing himself where he could spy with safety, he waited for developments.

Almost as soon as the team was unhitched, James Clark departed up the gulch toward the gold bar. Ryman chewed at the stem of his empty pipe and waited. Less than half an hour later he saw nine men emerge from the timber a short distance from the edge of the meadow. They galloped rapidly across the open space and up to the grove where the cabin was located. They were well spread out and obviously ready for any kind of reception.

Ryman was not the least surprised when he saw Mrs. Clark go

out to meet them. He could see her talking excitedly; then he saw the leader of the gang get off his horse, and give his men very obvious instructions to have a look around. Then the leader and Mrs. Clark went into the cabin.

It was not just what Ryman wanted or expected. With a muffled curse he beat a retreat. It would not do to be discovered, but he could not use the battery anyway until more of his foes were in the cabin.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOLL OF DYNAMITE.

MRS. CLARK'S first inquiry naturally was regarding her daughter, and Niles Dillard as naturally parried the question with another as to her personal appearance and the reason for her disappearance.

"She run away from here to escape a brute named Ryman. He follered her, but come back without her. I'm sure from what he says that he murdered her," she informed.

It was then that Niles ordered his men to look around the place while he talked with Mrs. Clark.

"You won't find Ryman here, but I can tell you where he is if you're men enough to avenge the wrongs of a poor family that ain't done no harm to anybody," she said.

"We happen to be lookin' for that very man, ma'am, an' furthermore this place belongs to us, so the boys will look around," Dillard said firmly.

"But my girl?" Mrs. Clark demanded.

Dillard seated himself on a bench and frowned. "I did see your daughter," he said. "She came to my camp. While we were away this man Ryman came. He was seen by one of my men. They went away together. We thought they had come back here. If they haven't ——" He stopped with a gloomy shake of the head that was not all affected.

"Then he has murdered her! Oh! Oh! May he burn till——" the woman suddenly fainted.

It required ten minutes for Dillard to revive her.

"Be as calm as you can, ma'am," Dillard advised. "There's a chance that he has only hid her somewhere, an' if he has we'll find her. But first we got to know where he is so we can git him."

"I can tell you, but I can tell you, too, that he's a devil. He expected you men to come an' he's layin' for you."

Dillard gave a nervous start. "Why didn't you say so before?" he demanded.

"He ain't right here. He told us to tell you when you come that he'd be up on another creek where he's got a gold mine."

Dillard certainly picked up his ears at that. "But why did he tell you to tell us?" he wondered.

"Because he wanted to git you over there where he could blow you all up," she said.

Dillard suddenly became livid with anger. Regardless of the presence of the woman, he swore wholeheartedly, and vowed vengeance. But he did not lose track of the main item.

"Is that really where the gold is?" he demanded.

"It was just a lie. I ain't seen no gold," Mrs. Clark answered stolidly.

"Look here woman: we can help you an' will, but you've got to come clean first. This is our ground an' we got to know where that gold is."

"Will you help find my girl if I tell you?"

"We sure will," Dillard promised eagerly.

"An'—an' will you do the right thing by us—give us our share o' the gold?" she insisted, not entirely unforgetful of the lure that had brought them to the valley.

"Hm-m-m, if it really pans out, of course," he agreed.

He got the whole story then, though the excited woman was incoherent at times. The outlaw leader was more excited than he had been for years. He knew that he must work fast. Ryman would have to be eliminated, and then they would have to turn their attention to David Martin. The cattle outfit simply could not be permitted to enter the valley now.

His men had again gathered outside the cabin, but it was getting dark. It was no time, he decided, to tell his men about the gold. Time enough for that later. He contented himself by informing them that Ryman had brutally murdered the girl, and that Mrs. Clark would conduct them to the fellow's hiding place.

"Didn't you find my husband?" Mrs. Clark asked.

"Nary a sign of anybody, ma'am," Clay replied.

"He could just as well show you," she said. "You men wait here an' I'll go git him. He's up——" She stopped suddenly, and Niles Dillard sensed the reason why.

"Just wait here, boys, till me an' this lady finds her husband. Maybe you'd better git you somethin' to eat."

"You're welcome to our grub," Mrs. Clark assured them. Dillard had mentioned dressing Betty's sore hand, and after that she had no doubt that these were the men Betty had gone out to find. Now that they were going to help her get revenge upon the monster whom she now saw in his true colors, nothing was too good for them.

Dillard urged her to mount one of the men's horses, but she declined, preferring to walk along by the side of Dillard's horse.

It was then beginning to get dark, but the skulker in the adjacent timber was still able to see what was going on. He followed the man and woman up the gulch, heard her shouting for James, and as it grew darker he heard finally James's hoarse voice in reply. Then the three were congregated at the end of the gold bar.

RYMAN'S face was distorted by fury, though he had expected the Clarks to do this very thing. He fingered the trigger of his rifle nervously. He was minded to commence pouring lead immediately, but finally curbed his temper. It would be better to wipe them all out together.

He followed them back to the cabin, and established himself again by his battery. But again he was disappointed as Dillard called his men outside. There was a hurried conference, and then two of the outlaws went for the horses that were grazing on the meadow a short distance away. It began to look as if they would never all get into the cabin.

When the horses were brought up the men all mounted, but it was discovered that there was no mount for Clark.

"You stay here with the woman, Dutch—you ain't much good nohow," Niles Dillard ordered, and Dutch gave up his horse to Clark.

The men clattered away, and Ryman had no difficulty guessing their objective. He waited until they were out of sight, and then

yielding to an impulse, he approached the cabin. Mrs. Clark was there, and she was the one primarily responsible for the treachery. And he was sure that the man left behind was the fellow he had previously intimidated when following Betty. They would not be hard to handle, and if, when the others returned from their fruitless search, they should find these two bound and gagged in the cabin, they would be pretty certain to all gather in or near the cabin long enough for him to blow them to destruction.

Mrs. Clark had just started to clean up the mess of dishes left by the men, and Dutch was trying to quiz her about the gold mine when Ryman appeared in the doorway. Mrs. Clark took one look at the grim expression on the face of the ex-convict and knew instantly that the fellow sensed her plan to have him captured. She read murder in his eyes, and all the old fear of him came back. As the .44 in his hand came up to cover Dutch she shut her eyes and screamed at the top of her voice.

The next moment Ryman leaped across the floor and clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Shut up or I'll choke the life outta you," he ordered. He hurled her violently into a corner of the room, and then turned his attention to the dumfounded Dutch. "Unbuckle your gun belt an' let it drop," he ordered, and was obeyed.

"Now take that piece o' string layin' there an' tie the old woman to that table," he continued.

Dutch leaped to obey. He had tied Mrs. Clark's hands behind her and was dragging her to the table; then he paused and his lower jaw dropped. The sight of still another stranger in the doorway was perfectly disconcerting. The direction of his gaze caused Ryman to whirl toward the door also.

David Martin slightly misinterpreted the scene before him. At the sound of a woman's desperate scream he had bounded toward the cabin, easily distancing the girl. But as he reached the door and saw a man manhandling a woman his attention centered upon that man rather than the other man in the room. He had sighted both men, and for all he knew there might be others. It was no time for preliminaries. One of Dutch's legs offered a perfect mark and he fired at it.

Wise enough to dodge immediately after pulling the trigger, David jumped back. The bullet from Slug Ryman's gun ripped into the door jamb close to his head and showered him with splinters. He stepped back in, firing from the waist; but Ryman's hand swept the coal-oil lamp from the table, plunging the room in darkness and spoiling his aim.

A moment after that, David collided violently with the leaping body of the huge convict. David was no dwarf, and knew how to take care of himself in any ordinary rough-and-tumble, but he had not the weight to resist such a catapult. He was knocked backward to the ground, and only just managed to retain his grip on his gun. The back of his head collided with something that made him see stars.

David sat up quickly but dizzily, but his assailant was not pushing his advantage. Indeed, he saw the blurred form of his foe just disappearing, while from the other side Betty came running.

"David! David! Are you hurt?" the girl gasped anxiously.

"No, I just got bumped. We—we've got to get your mother out,

She's inside there, an' the cabin's afire," David answered shakily.

But Mrs. Clark had managed to find her way outside, and Betty flew to her. The girl's arms went about her mother, and it was not for a minute that she observed that her embrace was not returned.

"Why, mother, what's the matter?" she exclaimed.

"My hands is tied, Betty—an' I thought you were dead."

"Mother, has Ryman—has he done—anything—to—to pa?" the girl faltered, while with nimble fingers she sought to untie the string around her mother's wrists.

"Your pa has gone to guide the men to where we thought Ryman was hidin', but he just come back, Ryman I mean, an' made the man who stayed behind tie me up. Then that man there came in an' shot Dutch instead of Ryman," Mrs. Clark exclaimed breathlessly.

"Gosh, did I get the wrong man?" David queried weakly. His head was beginning to clear, and suddenly he rushed back into the cabin, almost falling over Dutch as he did so, who was dragging himself to the door.

THE fire caused by the overturned lamp was spreading rapidly along the dry walls of the cabin. David seized the one bucket of water in the house and dashed it on the flames, but with no appreciable effect. He next attacked the flames with his coat, but the smoke strangled him, and he was forced to retreat.

The two women suddenly realized that the fire was seriously threatening the cabin, and joined their efforts with those of David, but ten minutes of desperate fighting demonstrated that the cabin was doomed. Not until then did David pay any real attention to the man he had shot.

"You say this fellow was being forced to tie your hands, Mrs. Clark?" he demanded.

"Yes. Slug Ryman had a gun on him," was the reply.

"But who is he?" David wondered.

Betty took her first look at the fellow. "Why, this is Dutch—one of Niles Dillard's men," she said.

"A Dillard outlaw, huh," David said grimly. "My mistake was in thinkin' the other fellow belonged to the gang, too. Where's the rest of your outfit buddy?"

Dutch lay sullenly silent, but Mrs. Clark looked her amazement.

"Betty, you told me you was goin' for help. Nine men come to-night, an' they had seen you. This man was one of 'em. What do you mean talkin' about outlaws?"

"They are outlaws, mother. This is David Martin, who is our friend," Betty answered.

"But I thought they was the ones," the worried older woman said. "Why, the leader said he had dressed that hand o' yours."

"He did. That was Niles Dillard, mother—the man who gave us four days to get out of here."

Mrs. Clark began to sway from side to side and moan. "I showed that man the ridge up the gulch that Ryman calls the gold bar," she said. "If they're outlaws, too, what'll they do to us?"

David was once more in complete possession of his mental faculties. He realized that there were two women in dire peril unless he could get them away from the valley.

"We've got to get out of here at once," he said. "Not only is Ryman still at large, but me an' Buck can't fight the whole Dillard gang."

"An' leave the valley to these people?" Betty demanded. It seemed to him that there was a tinge of regret in her tone.

"Only for the present," he explained patiently. "We'll return with the law at our back."

"But—my father? He is with those men?"

"You take your mother an' go back to Buck. I'll see what I can do," David suggested.

Betty vetoed it instantly. "You don't know pa. I guess we'll have to go leave him, but——" She stopped abruptly as they heard the thud of horses' feet.

"They're comin' back," she said. "They've seen the fire." Suddenly she realized what it would mean for them to fall into Dillard's hands. She caught her mother's arm on one side, while David grasped the older woman by the other arm, and they ran toward Buck and the horses. But the excitement had unnerved Mrs. Clark at last, and she impeded their progress. They were scarcely out of sight when the horsemen dashed up to the cabin.

"Go fetch Martin—he just went that way with the women. He shot me," they heard Dutch fairly scream.

The men gathered in front of the burning cabin while Niles Dillard hurled a few rapid-fire questions at the wounded outlaw.

"Come on, boys, we've got to git Martin," Dillard yelled, and put the spurs to his horse. Clay and Gordon were close beside him, but the others were a moment later getting started.

And then there was a terrific roar. The burning remainder of the cabin was obliterated in a great cloud of smoke that shot skyward like a great, inverted pyramid. An instant after the mass of smoke was broken by falling chunks of fire as bits of the débris came down in a shower. Yells and cries of anguish punctuated the noise made by the falling wreckage.

David and the two women crouched together under a tree while small particles of the destroyed cabin fell about them. They could scarcely see how the people nearer the cabin had escaped at all.

A moment later, however, they saw three men riding furiously toward them. David pushed the women behind the tree, and tried to conceal himself, but without avail. He was sighted by Niles Dillard, and the outlaw leader suddenly reined his horse, brought up his six-gun and fired. The bullet slapped into the tree beside David's body. The cowboy had fired at almost the same instant, but he, too, had scored a miss by a scant margin.

Then Clay was on one side of the tree and Gordon on the other. To resist further, David realized, was to endanger the lives of the women.

"Don't shoot again," he called to Dillard.

"Drop your gun then," the outlaw commanded, his white, even teeth flashing a grin of triumph.

David allowed his six-gun to fall to the ground and faced his enemies with cool indifference. Inwardly he was plunged in gloom. Had Niles Dillard not known of the gold the situation would have been serious enough; yet David felt that the outlaw would at least have spared his life after seeing to it that he did not return to the Shoshones. But with a gold mine of much promise at stake the situation was different. Dillard or any other outlaw would not be likely to let any one go free to set the law on him with so much at stake.

And David was more concerned about the women, or about Betty at least. He realized suddenly that the girl meant far more to him than his own life. His arm suddenly went about her protectingly, and she fitted into his sheltering arm.

Their one hope now was Buck Powell—a hope that proved short-lived. For Buck having left his horses to see what was going on, and seeing the cluster of people under the trees, had got too close and suddenly found himself covered by a gun in the unwavering hand of the villainous Clay.

CHAPTER IX.

DANGER ASSISTS.

NILES DILLARD took only time enough to make sure that there was no more of Martin's men about, and then herded the captives back to the ruins of the cabin. It was a ghastly scene, one that should have satisfied even Slug Ryman's blood lust.

Five of the outlaws were dead, and another was pinned to the ground under a bit of burning wreckage, and was obviously dying. Dutch had fared better than any of the others, and had escaped with only minor injuries in addition to his wound. To add to the horror of the scene were the mangled bodies of the outlaws' horses.

"What fools, to keep dynamite in the house!" Dillard raved.

"There wasn't any. I know there wasn't," Mrs. Clark denied hysterically.

David attempted in vain to shield the girl from the sight of broken men and horses.

"Pa must be here somewhere," she cried. "Let me find him."

"Shut up," Clay roared harshly. "The old pill couldn't keep up with us comin' back, so he'll be all right."

"This is a mess," Dillard said stormily. "Half of the gang wiped out, an' this on our hands."

"You'd better listen to a compromise, Dillard," David said.

"Compromise the devil! Any time we compromise it means we git beat out of this gold, an' we don't," the man retorted.

"Strikes me the population o' this valley needs thinnin' out some more," Clay said brutally. "We can handle the women maybe, but these other fellers are a liability."

"Well, tie 'em up to a tree for the present, an' tie 'em solid," Dillard ordered. "We got to see what we can do for Curly."

Clay and Gordon carried out the order while Dillard himself watched the women. Then the men returned, and Clay stood guard over the women while Dillard and Gordon turned their attention to the three wounded outlaws. There was still enough burning débris and wreckage lying about to make it almost as light as day.

The outlaws had for the time being forgotten Slug Ryman, and they had not at any time perhaps taken him very seriously. Martin and his outfit was what concerned Dillard most, and he felt that despite his own losses he had the cattlemen foul.

The air was suddenly shattered by the report of a rifle. Gordon, kneeling over Dutch at the moment, keeled gently on over and lay still, while Dutch implored some one to take him off.

At the first shot, Dillard and Clay leaped madly for the nearest place out of the revealing light. *Wham!* came the rifle report again, and Niles Dillard with a curse on his tongue stumbled and fell.

Clay alone gained the sheltering darkness. He paused to return the fire, but the assailant was invisible. It was too much for Clay. He had seen all of his companions stricken down, and this sudden death that seemed to lurk on every hand struck temporary terror to his soul. He suddenly shoved his gun back in the holster and took to his heels, crashing blindly into trees and bushes, while perspiration largely inspired by fear, half blinded him.

The man brought up sharply when he spied three horses that he had almost missed, the ones ridden by David, Buck, and Betty. That recalled him to his senses. He untied them quickly, mounted one and went on leading the others. His course was taking him along the edge of the meadow in the fringe of timber, the same way David, Betty and Buck had come in. Presently he discovered the two pack animals. His spirits began to rise. With an outfit of this kind he could live in the hills a long time if necessary. The man Ryman would see to Martin and his friends, and there might be a chance for him to ambush Ryman in turn. He might not be able to stop Martin's men for a while, but he could gather a gang of his own and take care of them; then work the gold mine in peace. With all five horses in his possession he decided to wait where he was till things had a chance to settle down.

BUT a moment after Clay's hurried departure, Slug Ryman came charging out of the brush. Betty had already reached David and was tearing at the ropes that bound him with feverish, frantic fingers. Ryman was upon her before the first knot was untied and hurled her aside. He swung his clubbed rifle with the intention of smashing David's skull. The man had gone berserk.

The girl gathered herself and rushed back in time to grasp Ryman's arm and deflect his blow. The gun butt struck David a glancing blow on the shoulder, inflicting a painful but not serious injury.

With a grunt Ryman let the rifle drop and turned his attention to Betty.

"I'm goin' to tie you to that wagon wheel till I tend them birds," he snarled, "an' then you'll do as I say or I'll whip the very life outta you."

"You'd better kill me straight off, because you can't never conquer me," she panted defiantly.

It was no easy matter for him to handle her, for she fought back with all the strength of her vigorous young body. Finally, however, he seemed to have her backed against the wheel. Then, suddenly, he let go with both hands and emitted a yell of surprised agony.

He followed the yell with a string of bitter oaths while he tore and cuffed at a small, snarling object venting a long-contained hatred by viciously clinging to the calf of the oppressor's leg. For at last Danger had seen his chance while his tormentor was struggling with the one thing that had ever been kind to him. The wire holding the wolf pup was just long enough to permit it to fasten its teeth in the man's tender flesh, and those teeth were long and sharp.

The moment the man released his hold, Betty darted back to David and Buck.

"Get away! Run! For God's sake get to the horses an' go back an' get our boys," David told her.

"But he'll kill you," she cried despairingly.

"He'll kill us all if you stay," David argued.

"Tain't no lie, sister. Our only chance is fer you t' git away an' bring Nate Jennison an' the boys here on the run," Buck added.

No thought of obeying them entered Betty's mind. She knew Ryman too well, and knew that they would find only dead men when they returned if she did get away. But she had many times thought of what she would do if Ryman ever attempted to do what he now seemed bent on, and always her thoughts had had to do with a rifle. A rifle bullet alone she felt could check the man's career. She remembered that there was a rifle under the stirrup fenders of her saddle. If she could only get that——

She broke and ran with all the speed she could muster, and was almost lost in the darkness again before Ryman finally released his hold on the wolf pup's throat and hurled its inert body the full length of the wire. He glanced around for the girl and just managed to catch a glimpse of her. There was no time to bother with the men if he was not to lose her, and they were tied up anyway. He lumbered away in pursuit, but the agile girl was able to hold her own.

Breathless, weak, and gasping, Betty reached the spot where they had left their horses. And then black despair settled over her when she discovered that they were gone.

Only one chance appeared to remain for her—to dodge the enemy and make him lose sight of her in the trees and darkness. Heretofore they had been running along the edge of the meadow where the timber was broken by open spaces. Now with a final desperate spurt she raced uphill into the thick timber.

Ryman was still in pursuit. She could hear him pounding through the timber recklessly, and she realized that she could not long hold the pace. She heard the man stumble and fall; his oaths did not tell her that his mangled calf was hurting him and impeding his progress, but such was the case. Then she saw a huge black stump that was burned out on one side. With a prayer that he might overlook her, she dropped into the burned-out cavern. And Ryman passed her by and disappeared despite the frantic beating of her heart and her painful efforts to suppress her loud breathing.

CHAPTER X.

LAST OF THE OUTLAWS.

IT seemed to David and Buck that their one chance now depended upon Mrs. Clark. They were sure the woman was unhurt, but she was in hysterics and their appeals made no impression upon her whatever.

Then David saw a man crawling painfully toward them. He could make only a few feet of progress and then be obliged to stop. Each time his head would drop to the ground, and it seemed to them that he would never come on. At last, David could see that it was his arch enemy, Niles Dillard; but what the man's present intentions might be he could only guess.

At last, after what seemed ages to the tied-up men, Niles Dillard reached David's feet. Ensued another age while the outlaw chief rested, and then he began to fumble in his pocket. With tremendous relief they saw him produce a knife.

But would his strength last long enough for him to use it? The suspense dragged their souls like the teeth of a harrow.

The outlaw got one hand upon David's knee, and after a bitter struggle that must have been torture to him he dragged himself to his knees and slashed once, twice, three times.

"There, blast you," he croaked, and slumped to the ground, dead.

It was not difficult for David to release himself after that though one arm was strangely numb. Then with the knife he managed to quickly liberate Buck.

Buck bent over and folded the dead outlaw's arms over his chest. "Ol' boy, we'll git you a clean shirt an' plant you proper jest as soon as we find the girl an' git that shootin', dynamitin' sidewinder that's pryin' up all this hell," he said.

They were to reckon with the blood-mad Ryman sooner than they bargained for.

"There's some guns scattered around here, an' we're liable t' need 'em," David murmured, and stooped to look for Dillard's weapon. But either he had dropped it when he was shot or it had fallen from the holster during his weary crawl to cut them loose.

They started to move toward the bodies of the other outlaws, but David reached out and brought his companion to a halt.

"Stop!" he muttered. "He's comin' back. He can shoot us before we can find a gun. As we were!"

They "froze" to the tree where they had been roped, hoping that the absence of the ropes might not be noticed in the darkness.

Ryman came limping forward somewhat hurriedly. He could make out the two prisoners as he had left them and for the moment he failed to observe the body of the dead man almost at their feet.

"I'll learn you fools to come in here an' try to bust up my game," he said loudly.

He all but stumbled over the body of Niles Dillard. "What the devil?" he demanded, and stooped over to have a look.

Then David and Buck were upon him. Their combined assault bowled him over, but they failed to pin him to the ground. For the first time they fully realized his tremendous size and strength. One huge paw caught Buck by the belt and with a seemingly careless swing he tossed the cow-puncher several feet away. Then with a bound he was upon David.

David side-stepped the gigantic ruffian, and a moment later he shot his left into Ryman's jaw and got away again. He knew he had far greater speed than his big foe, and Ryman was handicapped also by his lacerated leg. On the other hand David could do little with his right hand on account of his bruised shoulder.

Then Buck was on his feet and fighting mad. "Jest fer that you big bloke I'm gonna bust you wide open," he declared as he rushed in blindly.

Ryman paused in his tracks, and without making any effort to block Buck's wild swing took it squarely in the face. It did no more than rock him back on his heels. Then, before Buck could recover his balance, a difficult thing to do with his high-heeled boots, Ryman landed a mighty blow to the puncher's jaw and Buck passed out of the picture.

Realizing that now the fight was entirely up to him, David faced the rushing giant grimly. He must depend upon his footwork absolutely

until he could get a chance to get his hands on a gun. It was no easy thing to do there, where it was just dark enough to obscure the many pieces of broken wood—and worse—that fairly strewed the ground. Had it been lighter he might have found a gun without difficulty, but the foe certainly gave him no time to grope around.

MORE than once David felt the man's clutching fingers, but each time he managed to jerk loose; while again and again his hard left hand smashed into the fellow's brutal face. He realized presently that Ryman was tiring and slowing up. Already badly winded from his chase after Betty, Ryman was finding himself weakening badly. For the first time he realized that he might not succeed in getting his hands on the enemy and crush him as he wanted to. Then for the first time since the fight started he thought of the six-gun at his hip.

David had been watching for his opponent to attempt to draw, and he saw the fellow's hand go toward the gun. Instantly he stopped and started a vicious kick at the man's hand. The hard toe of his boot caught the under side of Ryman's wrist; the gun flew up and back over Ryman's shoulder. For the second time that night Ryman emitted a yell of pain and grabbed his wrist. In an instant, David was running toward the ruins of the cabin.

"Damn you, git off me," he heard somebody croak, and guided by the sound he found the wounded Dutch vainly trying to rid himself of the incubus of a dead man across his chest.

Frantically, David turned the dead man over and his hand came in contact with the handle of a revolver. In a flash he jerked it out and whirled just in time to meet Ryman once more bearing down upon him with a hoarse bellow of insane rage.

David pulled the trigger three times—and he knew that each shot went home—before he brought Ryman down. At the last shot the form of the big ex-convict sprawled heavily forward across Dutch.

"Say, I ain't no cemetery. I wish they'd quit pilin' their dead folks on me," that worthy whined.

Thoroughly sickened by the night's ghastly business, David reeled against the nearest tree. Presently he saw a vague form rushing forward with wildly swinging arms, and he wondered if there was still another man to fight and perhaps kill.

"Lemme hit 'im again," begged the strange figure, and David sighed with relief as he recognized Buck's voice.

Presently Buck was made to realize that the fight was over.

"It looks like we sure whipped 'em proper, but where's the girl I'd like t' know?" he asked.

"She should be on her way out to the boys, but this brute followed her. If he did catch her——" David paused as the horror of the thing impinged upon his mind. He turned Ryman over, but the man was dead. There could be no information from that source, and he let the body roll back upon Dutch.

"Come on, Buck, we've got to find out if she got away," David urged.

"Don't leave me alone with them corpses," Dutch pleaded.

"Reminds me I may need a gun, an' you prob'ly got one," Buck said. He found the gun and dashed after

David, while Dutch cursed and cried impotently.

By accident they ran across the horses that had belonged to Dillard and Gordon. Hastily mounting, they rode on to where they had left their own mounts.

"She must have got away," David said hopefully.

They rode to where they had left the two pack horses, and found them missing. Completely puzzled, they looked at each other helplessly.

"She wouldn't have took 'em all." Buck stated the obvious.

"One outlaw got away," David mused.

"If it would only come daylight," Buck lamented.

"You go on back an' get some of the boys," David said decisively. "I've got a hunch that Betty is still here, an' I'm goin' to stick."

He rode slowly back to the destroyed cabin and its gruesome sights, only partly concealed by the darkness. The range he had been prepared to fight for meant nothing to him now; neither did the gold mine with its presumably fabulous wealth. The one thing in the world that mattered was a slim, courageous girl.

He found Dutch still cursing his luck, but Mrs. Clark was better. He shouted the girl's name at the top of his voice, but there was no reply. To hunt for her in the dark was a waste of time, so he turned his attention to the men. All of them were beyond help except Dutch. He carried Dutch to a clean, open place and to the best of his ability cared for the outlaw's wounds while Mrs. Clark stood by and declared again and again that her husband and daughter were both dead; that the gold had killed them, and would destroy any one who had anything to do with it.

THE long night ended at last, and with the coming of daylight came James Clark. There was a great lump on his head where he declared he had been hit with a gun in the hands of one of the men he had undertaken to guide the evening before, but his mind was fairly clear.

"When they saw the cabin afire they turned back, an' one of 'em said he bet they was bein' double-crossed. I said he was a liar, an' then I got hit. That's all I know," the contractor explained.

David explained things to them as best he could and assured them that Betty was safe and had gone for help. He could not believe it himself, but it served to steady them. Then there were eight dead men to be buried, and that had to be attended to at once.

Clark caught up one of his teams and a grave large enough for all the outlaws was dug out with plow and scraper. They returned to where the cabin had stood, and were just in time to see five horses coming out of the timber.

With an exclamation of relief, David recognized his own horses. But on one of the horses rode a dejected-looking outlaw with a badly pock-marked face. On another was Betty Clark.

The three people on the ground ran to welcome the girl, but it was David who assisted her from the saddle. Her arms went about his neck, but he noticed that one small, capable hand firmly held a six-shooter.

"Golly, girl, where have you been?" he asked her with a palpable tremor of excitement in his voice.

"When I got away from Ryman

last night I found these horses, but I found this man, too. He had me helpless before I knew he was there, an' then he made me go with him," she explained. "I guess he figgered on finishin' up what Slug Ryman had begun."

"But how did you manage to—to beat him?"

A trace of a smile appeared on Betty's face. "You remember that gun you wanted me to carry an' I wouldn't?" she asked. "You packed it away among the dishes. When we stopped to get breakfast this man made me unpack. Said he had just as well start breakin' me in."

She paused, and David glowered murderously at Clay.

"I knew where the gun was an' I got it an' pointed it at him," she finished simply.

"But—but it wasn't loaded. I took the shells out," David explained.

"I guess he didn't know it, David," she grinned.

Clay's angry, surprised jerk made them laugh, and brought a taunt from Dutch to his recent fellow in crime.

"Never mind, you boys will both be doin' time soon," David assured them.

"Not me," Dutch predicted. "There's still a premium for State's evidence."

An hour later a hastily prepared meal was over and James Clark commenced to speak.

"It looks like you had a right in here all right, an' I don't object to your cattle, but I want some assurances that you won't beat me out of my gold mine," he said.

"You're welcome to it," David assured him. "I'll even help you finish gettin' the water out because the canal will serve to bring irrigation water to the meadow next year. You see, all Betty an' me wants is to make a real cattle ranch out of this valley."

"You an' Betty? You mean——"

"That we're goin' out to Fourbear to get married as soon as the boys get up here," David smiled. "You'd better go along an' file a claim on your gold bar."

"But me an' ma only wanted that gold t' do somethin' for Betty," James frowned. "Now if she marries you it'll ball things all up." Then his face suddenly brightened.

"I know how to fix it. We'll both file an' go pardners on it."

"Shall we?" David asked Betty.

She shook her head. "Make dad keep it. We'll stick to our ranch." She watched him narrowly. She loved this man, but she realized that she really knew little about him. Would he show disappointment, she wondered? Had the gold lust perhaps gripped him as it had the other men who had come to the valley?

"That's the stuff!" he exulted with an enthusiasm that she knew was real. "You keep your mine, an' I hope it pans out a million, but I've already beat you out of everything you folks have got that's worth while."

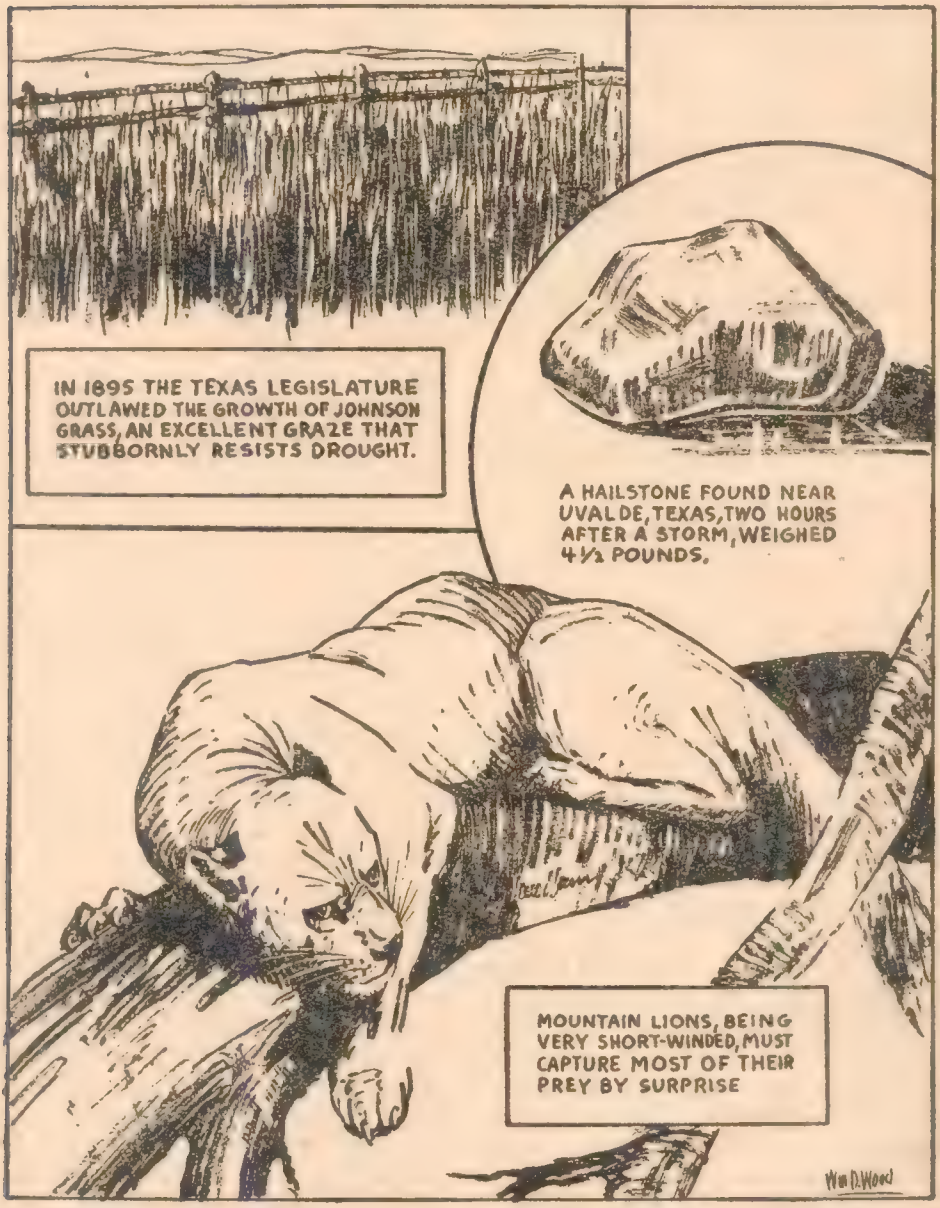
The gyppo girl smiled contentedly. She knew David loved her. Her dreams were to become a reality. She began planning the kitchen curtains, and the flower garden. Side by side with David! It would be heaven.

In Next Week's Issue, "TUMBLEDOWN'S TOP HAND,"

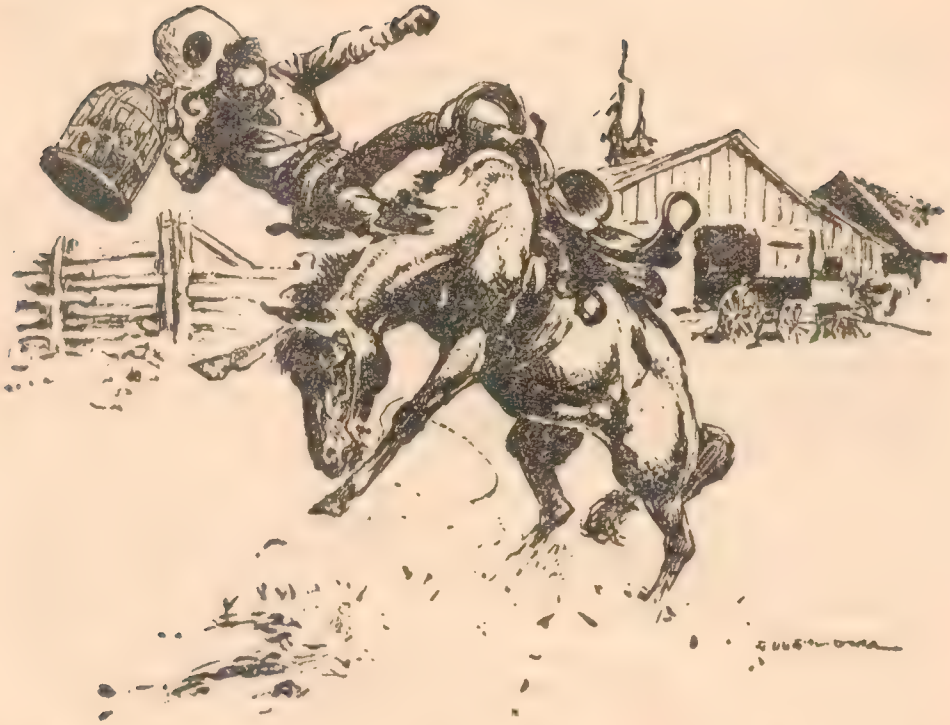
by JOHNSTON McCULLEY.

Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.



Hep Gets The Bird

By GLENN H. WICHMAN

Author of "Four-finger Brand," etc.

ANY coin of more value than a two-bit piece always burned a hole in "Hep" Gallegher's pants pocket. Me and him have been partners for a long time now and the most money that Hep ever saved at one time from his wages was a hundred and twenty dollars, and the only reason he saved that was because he was laid up with a broken leg and couldn't go to town. But the instant he was up and around, the one hundred and twenty disappeared like water in the Mojave Desert.

Every so often Gallegher was seized with an uncontrollable itch to buy something. He wasn't at all particular about what it was just so long as it could be traded for some good United States coin. But whatever it was he bought he always thought that it was a bargain and that life wouldn't be worth living unless he had it. In fact, to hear him talk, he couldn't possibly have lived unless he *did* have it.

That's what I was thinking as I sat smoking on the cook-shack steps after the noonday meal. Hep had laid off work that day, had drawn twenty dollars on his wages, and had ridden in to the neighboring town of

Santa Bonita. Right after breakfast he had been seized with a buying spree, and there wasn't any use of him even thinking of working until he'd got it out of his system. The boss, Wade MacDonald, who was a peculiar sort of a cuss, had kicked like all get out, but Hep was adamant; he had earned the money and darned if he wouldn't do with it as he pleased, which, of course, was legal enough even if there wasn't much intelligence to it.

Long before I'd finished the smoke Gallegher came riding in through the ranch-yard gate. He was carrying something on his off side, but as the horse was in the way I couldn't make out what it was. No more had Gallegher passed through the gate than his roan horse suddenly went wild! The roan doubled up in a knot, its four hoofs left the ground all at once, its back arched, and Hep Gallegher went sailing through the air like a comet! This was very strange goings on because my partner was a more than fair to middling rider.

By the time I'd stood up, dust obscured the scene, but in an instant the dust began to settle and I could see what was happening. The roan, bucking like all get out, came tearing by the cook shack, bound for the corrals. Blood ran from a spot on the animal's rump; no wonder it had gone crazy. The dust settled some more and there on the ground sat Gallegher, looking utterly dumfounded. In his left hand he held a large bird cage, and in the bird cage was a parrot. The parrot was flapping around and making a noise like a fire engine.

Just as I reached Gallegher he picked himself up. "Shucks!" growled Hep. "That was a mortifying thing to have had happen. Confucius must have taken a bite out of the horse."

"To the best of my knowledge," I said, "Confucius died several thousand years ago. It would be practically impossible for him to bite anything."

Hep pointed at the bird cage. "The parrot," he informed me, "is named Confucius because he is a Chinese parrot and because he is a lineal relative of a parrot that once belonged to Confucius."

I wanted to laugh, but didn't. Hep had gone and done it again!

Then I noticed that the side of my partner's neck was bloody and that part of the lobe of his left ear was missing.

"A mere trifle," explained Gallegher. "Confucius is a playful little cuss. I was listening to him talk and he nipped me. When we get to know each other better he'll quit doing such things." Hep looked around the ranch yard. "Glad to see that the boys have gone to work and that the cook's hard of hearin'. That'll give me time to get myself organized before the boys come back."

Leaving the parrot under a tree, we found the roan horse in behind the house. It had got tired of bucking by now and was glad to be taken down to the corral and unsaddled. Finished with that, Hep washed the blood off his neck and off his shirt and we went back and sat down on the grass beside the parrot cage. Confucius had gotten over making a noise like a fire engine; he sat on a perch looking at us with one eye and making popping sounds with his beak. He was a threadbare sort of a bird and about the mangiest-looking parrot I'd ever seen.

"Of course," I began, "you paid twenty dollars for him?"

"I should say not!" declared Gallegher. "I only paid nineteen dollars an' ninety-five cents for him. Before I bought an interest in Con-

fucius I'd had myself a small beer. That is, I only own half of the bird; the balance of him belongs to Doctor Anthony Duberry."

"Who," I asked, "is Anthony Duberry?"

"Doc Duberry," explained Hep, "is the discoverer and compounder of Duberry's All Purpose Chinese Electric Liniment, good for man or beast. It will either prevent sickness or cure it. Me and the doc have gone into pardnership with each other."

"You've sure done well by yourself," I told him. "Here you've worked for half a month and all you've got to show for it is half a parrot. Lemme see a bottle of the liniment before I kick you."

BUT Hep didn't have a bottle of the Chinese liniment with him. "Doc Duberry," he informed me, "is now selling it in Santa Bonita. To-night he'll be out here to the Box T to sell it to the boys. But your talk of wantin' to kick me is all nonsense. Why, heavens to Betsy, I'm just starting out on the highway of success! For the first time in my life I'm going places. No more cow business for me. I've chased my last dogie!" He was as serious as though he'd suddenly fallen heir to a bank.

"Uh-huh," I grunted. "I don't doubt but that you're going some place. Probably to the poor farm. Now if you'll kindly explain why you paid nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents for one half of a parrot that couldn't possibly be worth over fifteen cents, I'll be much obliged."

Hep looked at me with blood in his eye. "Sometimes, George," he said, "I think you're the dumbest gent that ever lived on this side of the Mississippi. You're lacking in everything—intelligence and understanding, and appreciation of money; you have no more breadth to you than a piece of string, to say nothing of a complete lack of knowledge of history, philosophy, and geography——"

"Quit it," I interrupted; "it's not *you* that's talkin'; it's this fellow Duberry. You've been listening to him."

"What of it?" snapped Gallegher. "The doc's forty times smarter than you are! In fact, the parrot's forty times smarter than you and me an' Doctor Duberry put together."

"That," I told him, "is a lengthy statement. But go right on."

"Confucius," said Hep, pointing at the bird cage, "comes, as I said before, from a long line of parrots. The original parrot that started the line was a pupil of this Chinaman, Confucius. Now this Chinaman, Confucius, was the smartest gent that ever lived, no two ways about it. He taught his parrot all that he knew, and that parrot passed the knowledge down through other parrots. This bird I've got here knows all that the old Chinaman ever knew."

"Which was what?" I asked.

"Have you ever observed a Chinese laundry?" patiently pleaded Gallegher.

I had.

"Have you ever noticed," continued Hep, "that when you take your spare shirts to a Chinese laundry the Chinaman just looks once at you and writes something on a slip of paper? Doesn't take your name or your address or where you work or your employer's brand or anything, yet when you go back for your shirts you always get the right ones. That's what I call being pretty smart."

"Let's get back to the parrot that you paid nineteen dollars and ninety-

five cents for," I urged, "and leave the shirt-washing business to the Chinamen."

"All right," agreed Hep. "We'll do that. Now this parrot, Confucius, has the ability to foretell the future——"

"As well as to take pieces out of men and horses——" I interrupted. But there wasn't any use of trying to make Gallegher feel foolish or to point out to him what a jackass he was, so I gave up.

"You numbskull!" shouted Hep. "If you don't believe that Confucius can foretell the future, just ask him a question and he'll answer it."

"All right," I said, "I'll do that. Listen, Confucius, will I have my leg broken to-morrow like my partner once had his broken?"

The parrot looked at me, first with one eye and then with the other. His mouth opened and words came out. They sounded something like "One-long-lung!" without there being any spaces between the words.

"Ah!" exclaimed Hep. "We'll see what that means! 'One-long-lung.'" He took a piece of writing paper from his pocket and looked at it. "It means 'yes,'" he announced. "You'll break your leg to-morrow. Now, if you have any sense you'll stay in bed all day long to-morrow and then you won't break your leg. You owe me a dollar."

"What for?" I snorted.

"For having had Confucius answer a question," elucidated Hep. "One question, one dollar; two questions for a dollar and a half, or the super-bargain rate of three questions for two dollars. That's what I brought the parrot out here for; to answer questions at so much per question."

"I'll pay you," I said, "on the thirty-first day of next February. Remind me of it. In the meantime, let me see that piece of paper."

But Hep wouldn't give it up. "On it," said he, "are the answers that Confucius makes in Chinese and what those answers mean in English. Doc Duberry wrote it out for me so that when the boys come in from work to-night me and Confucius can go into the question-answering business. To-morrow I'll move on to another ranch. Shucks! There ain't no limit to the money that me and the doc are goin' to make."

"It's passing strange," I objected, "that when you ask Confucius a question in English that he should answer in Chinese. What's the matter with him? Can't he speak English?"

Hep smiled. "I thought of the same thing, which proves that every once in a while your head works. I asked doc about it. He said that it was a peculiarity of Chinese parrots. They understand English perfectly, but refuse to talk it. It's an old Hong Kong custom. Now you take for example a Chinese laundry——"

"I haven't any interest in Chinese laundries," I told him as I got up, "or you either, until you get some sense. And don't get it into your thick head that you've only bought half that parrot because you've bought *all* of him. By now Doctor Duberry is high-tailing out of Santa Bonita with your twenty dollars, minus a nickel. You'll never see him again."

THE boss had told me to look over the drift fence in White Rock Wash, so I got my horse and rode up there. It was along toward evening when I came back. A very fancy-looking fellow dressed in a yellow alpaca suit was just dismounting at the hitch rack. Hep had hurried out of the bunk house to meet him. They shook hands and patted each other on the back, and

Gallegher motioned for me to come up.

"Wise guy," said Hep to me, "this is Doctor Duberry."

"Well!" exclaimed Duberry. "So this is Hep's partner, George. George, I'm pleased to meet you. Any friend of Gallegher's is a friend of mine."

"Which may not be saying very much," I reminded him.

Hep glowered at me and I decided to shut up. Anyway, it was kind of hard to be mad with the doc because he was such a pleasant-looking gent and had such an infectious smile. Oddly enough I had some faint recollection of having seen him before. He looked to me like a man I had seen riding on the outskirts of the Box T the day before.

"Have you got a bottle of the horse liniment with you?" I asked him, so as to change the subject. I even got out a dollar so as to pay for the stuff.

Doctor Duberry seemed kind of embarrassed. "Very sorry, my friend, but I sold the last one this afternoon in Santa Bonita. First thing in the morning I'll compound some more. By the way, do you suppose the boss would mind if I had some supper with you boys in the cook shack?"

"What he doesn't know," explained Hep, "will never make his head ache. Come on."

By now the rest of the Box T hands had drifted in. We washed in the trough, the cook rang the bell, and then all ten of us, including the doctor, went into the cook shack. On a little table in one corner stood the bird cage with the parrot inside it. Confucius was making funny noises and some of the men objected to his presence, but Hep offered to fight anybody who wanted to argue about it, so we dropped the matter and went to eating.

In the shuffle Doc Duberry got separated from me and Hep and was at the opposite end of the table from where we were seated. But this didn't bother the doc any because he was the kind of a gent who was a past master at meeting folks and would have been perfectly at home anywhere, even in jail.

"You see," whispered Gallegher in my ear, "you was entirely wrong about him runnin' off with my nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents."

"Mebbe," I suggested, likewise in a whisper, "he's lookin' for something else to run off with, and then he can run off with both things at the same time."

"For two cents," grunted Hep, "I'd pop you on the nose!"

But before he could get around to it the doc had finished meeting the men who sat around him and, in a loud voice, had started to tell stories. He knew more stories about the same two Irishmen than any one I'd ever run across. He kept us more or less laughing until we were through with the meal. The fellow was quite a clown, but beneath it I could see that he was watching us like a hawk.

"What's his *real* business?" I mumbled at Hep.

"Chinese parrots and electric liniment," answered Gallegher.

Doc Duberry interrupted what more I was thinking of saying, by standing up. "Gentlemen," he began, "we're all friends here. Each and every one of us is a good fellow. Now we come to an enlightening as well as entertaining part of the evening's pleasure. In the far corner is a parrot owned jointly by myself and Hep Gallegher. This bird is one of the remarkable animals now living, if not *the* most remarkable." Then the doc went on to tell all

about Confucius and how the parrot could foretell the future. "He knows all, sees all, tells all," continued Duberry. "Confucius has appeared before the crowned heads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ordinarily the charge for having the parrot answer one question is one dollar, but you gents are all good fellows and hard-working men, so Gallegher and I, for this special occasion, are going to violate our rules. Each of you may ask one question, receive the answer, and there will be no charge whatever. Mr. Gallegher, am I right?"

Hep didn't think much of this idea, but there was nothing much for him to do except to give in.

"I might explain, gentlemen," put in Duberry, "that after we are through with this performance Gallegher and I are taking the parrot up to the ranch house. That will *not* be a free performance. Wade MacDonald, having lots of money, will pay plenty."

OF course, the boys didn't have any objection to this arrangement; in fact, they thought it was a swell idea. Gallegher brought the parrot cage over from the corner and put it on the table. Then we lined up and each of us asked Confucius a question. The parrot answered in Chinese and Duberry, smiling all the while, interpreted the answers.

The first two men wanted to know if their girls still loved 'em. The parrot seemed to think so. The next man wanted to know if he'd lose his job. The parrot said not.

"Listen, Hep," I whispered in my partner's ear, "whether the answer is yes or no, Confucius always says the same thing. All that I can hear him say is 'one long lung,' or whatever it is."

"Your hearing's out of order," Gallegher assured me. "Chinese is a language of inflections. It's not so much what a Chinaman says as it is the way he says it. Doc was telling me about it."

My turn came next. "Confucius," I asked, "will I break my leg tomorrow?" This was the same question that I'd asked that afternoon.

The parrot looked me over and gave the answer.

"No, my friend," announced the doctor, "you will *not* break your leg to-morrow."

"Hold on here," I objected. "There's some mistake about this. Only a few hours ago I was going to break it an' now I'm not."

"Tush! Tush!" chuckled Doc Duberry. "Let's have no arguments over a mere question of veracity. Gentlemen, the evening is wearing away and it's high time that Gallegher and I departed for the ranch house. If you'll pardon us——"

Doc Duberry promptly picked up the parrot cage and walked out of the cook shack. Hep followed him, and I followed Hep. Only after we'd got outside and had started walking up the gentle slope toward the boss's residence did Duberry discover that I was along. He dropped back beside me and Hep.

"George," he said to me, "you have the soul of a skeptic. Skepticism is all right at times, but not to-night. With all due respect I ask you to return to the cook shack and there await our return."

"Go on back," added Gallegher. "We don't want a gent like you along. Here I'm about to make some money and you're doing your best to stop me. Fine kind of a partner you've turned out to be!"

"You birds'll have a tough time to get rid of me," I said. "All that glitters is not gold and you gents don't

even glitter. There's both something rotten in Denmark and on the Box T."

"Dammit," growled doc, for the first time showing a trace of heat. "You're having hallucinations."

"For two cents," grunted Gallegher, "I'd wrap a gun barrel around your ears."

This wasn't getting us anywhere, so I compromised. "One way or the other," I said, "I'm going along so as to protect my empty-headed partner. But I'll agree to this—I'll keep my mouth shut. The boss is of legal age. If he's chump enough to be taken in by a couple of green-goods men and a parrot, that'll be his hard luck."

"Spoken like a man," declared Doc Duberry. "Let's have done with nonsense and get down to business. Now for the boss, Wade MacDonald."

When we got up on the veranda of the ranch house Duberry handed Hep the parrot cage. "You handle the parrot this time," he said. "MacDonald knows you better than he does me; in fact, he doesn't know me at all and so he'll be less likely to put up an argument if you tell him what we've come for."

We knocked on the front door and waited for an answer. The prospects didn't look any too good. It was a hundred-to-one shot that Gallegher would lose his job, and me with him. MacDonald was a surly, suspicious sort of a man and as hard as a keg of nails. I had never noticed any capacity for nonsense about the fellow either. Probably he'd get mad and throw us out. The boss had only owned the Box T for about four months, and while he paid well and regularly, nobody had ever thought to be chummy with him. He was the kind of a gent who holds you out a couple of arms' lengths.

Pretty soon the door opened and there stood Wade MacDonald. When he saw Hep holding the parrot cage he first frowned and then he grinned. "Well," he said. "So you boys are bringing me a present. I'd almost forgot that it was my birthday. Come in."

We trooped into the living room, me, Hep and Doc Duberry.

Gallegher gulped over the idea of giving the parrot away and then he unlimbered his vocal cords. "Mr. MacDonald," began Hep, "we're bringing you something better than just an ordinary present. We're bringing you the key to the future. Meet Doctor Duberry, who is my partner in the futuring business."

Wade MacDonald and the doc shook hands. MacDonald looked at us as though he thought we were out of our heads. "Futuring business?" he repated. "What do you mean by that?"

Hep pointed at the parrot. "Confucius," he said, "can tell you what's going to happen either to-morrow, next week or ten years from now."

Any ordinary man would have expected the boss to have either laughed or done something violent, but he did neither. MacDonald's swarthy face was as sober as a judge's and there was the light of genuine interest in his black eyes. He looked intently at the parrot and the parrot looked just as intently at him.

Gallegher promptly warmed up to the subject and told the history of the bird, beginning with the old Chinaman named Confucius and ending up with the wonders of Chinese laundries. Again I thought that the boss would toss us out of the ranch house, but he did nothing of the sort.

"I've had my fortune told by lots of different methods," he soberly said, "but never by a parrot." The

boss was all a-twitter; perspiration even beaded out on his forehead. I was disappointed in the gent; he was falling for the foolishness, hook, line and sinker. Mebbe having his fortune told was what he was most addicted to.

THEN it was that Doc Duberry took command of the situation. "Mr. MacDonald," he said, "seeing that Hep Gallegher works for you, we are going to make you a special rate. Confucius will answer any reasonable number of questions you can ask him for the total sum of ten dollars, cash in advance."

"That's not too much by any means," replied MacDonald. He drew ten dollars for his pocket and put it on the table beside the parrot cage. "What'll I start with?"

"Anything you like," directed Duberry. "The bird's knowledge is practically limitless."

Hep had stepped back from the table and now stood beside me. "What'd I tell you?" he chortled at me in a whisper. "The boss ain't like you; he's got a little sense. Why, Confucius is goin' to make me a million dollars."

There wasn't time to argue about it, for the boss had started to ask his question. First he wanted to know if he'd ever get married. Confucius was as mum as an oyster; he didn't even squawk. "Ah," I thought, "the thing's blown up."

"Speak louder," directed Duberry. "Confucius, owing to his great antiquity, is sometimes a little deaf."

MacDonald repeated the question in a loud voice. Confucius came to life and jabbered at him.

"Yes," translated the doc, "you're going to get married."

This pleased the boss because, of late, he had been sparking a widow in Santa Bonita. Then the boss wanted to know how his health was going to be and when he was going to get a letter and a lot of other questions. All the answers pleased him very much and were evidently the answers that he had hoped to receive.

Before MacDonald had quite finished, Duberry interrupted him. "Most men," said the doc, "have treasures or keepsakes hidden away which they put a lot of store by. Many men spend considerable time worrying over whether the hiding place they have selected is a good one. Confucius is kind of a specialist in that line. If you have any worries of that sort, don't hesitate to speak of them."

"There," thought I, "is the catch! It was a long time in coming to the surface, but now it's here."

The boss's expression changed. The one of satisfaction that had been on his face disappeared. He crossed himself. "Of course, I have a few little knicknacks hidden away," he admitted. "Nothing of any particular value, but, of course——" Then he asked the parrot if the hiding place he had selected was a safe and sound one.

Duberry listened to the bird's answer and dolefully shook his head. "You've made a mistake, MacDonald. The hiding place you have selected for your keepsakes is neither a good one nor a safe one." Then he picked up the ten dollars and handed it to Hep. "Well, MacDonald, we'll have to be going now, and thank you very much. Time will prove that Confucius was a hundred per cent right in all his answers. Thank you very much."

For some reason doc seemed in a great hurry to get out of the house. He grabbed the parrot cage and started for the door. Me and Hep

followed him. We went outside, closed the door behind us, and stepped down off the veranda. Twenty feet and Duberry suddenly stopped. He handed Confucius to Gallegher. "You and George," he told him, "keep on to the bunk house. I'll be down there shortly." With that he turned around and started back for the ranch house.

"No, you don't!" I said, and followed him. "If there's dirty work afoot here, I'm goin' to be in on it. The boss has always been fair——"

"Well—walk quietly then," interrupted Duberry, "and keep your big mouth shut."

All three of us tiptoed up on the veranda, moved a little to the right, and looked in through a living-room window. The doc was standing right in front of me. It was a singular thing we saw there. Wade MacDonald was down on his hands and knees in the center of the living room. He had rolled back a rug and was just opening a little trapdoor in the floor.

Doc Duberry's hand reached in under his left armpit. The skunk was going for a gun! "Stop it!" I yelled, and made a grab for him. But Duberry was too quick. He'd already put his head down and went plunging through the window and into the living room. He carried most of the glass with him. Hell broke loose then, right then and there.

Duberry moved more like a panther than he did like a man of his weight and build. No more had he hit the floor inside than he called on Wade MacDonald to surrender. Instead of surrendering, the boss sprang up and his hand streaked it for his holster. The roar of six-guns was instantaneous. The boss promptly got the worst of it. Three shots and he was on the floor. Judging from the hole in his head, he would never get up again.

Doc Duberry wheeled on me and Hep. Just as we were getting around to fire through the window he covered us. "Keep your shirts on," he yelled at us, "and come on in here! This is no robbery! Wade MacDonald ain't this fella's name. Up North they call him Rat Livermore. There never was a more unscrupulous bank robber——"

You could have knocked me and Gallegher over with a broomstick. We climbed through the window while the boys came running up from the bunk house. Pretty soon "Doc Duberry" had identified himself as being one James Hathaway, a bank detective.

"Boys," explained the detective, "I've been scouting around here for the past two weeks trying to cook up some scheme to get Rat Livermore to reveal the hiding place of the forty thousand dollars in bonds he stole. It wouldn't have done the bank any good merely to have sent him to jail. I found out that Rat had a fondness for consulting soothsayers. The rest was easy. I borrowed a parrot from a Chinese laundry up the line and made myself up as a medicine man. Then, thanks to the accommodating and gullible Hep Gallegher——"

Hep was blushing like a bride.

"Don't do that," said the man we had known as Duberry. "You've got five hundred dollars coming to you, which is half the reward money. There isn't another man in this room could have helped me as well as you did."

My partner took the left-handed compliment at face value. His chest swelled up so much that he nearly fell over backward. There never was a guy anywhere quite like Hepburn C. Gallegher.

PART III.

Trempers Never Cry

By SETH RANGER

HEADED for Alaska and his father after his mother's death, little Jeff Tremper is told by his uncle that "we Trempers never cry." The ship is sinking and the uncle lowers the boy into a lifeboat. The uncle goes down with the ship.

The lifeboat is found by Bull Jared, a bitter enemy of the lad's father, Buck Tremper. Learning the boy's identity, Jared decides to keep him, raise him as his own son, train him to become a wolf like himself, and then turn him against his real father.

Jeff, grown to young manhood, is wise in the ways of the North and the nefarious ways of such as Jared, and becomes adept in robbing fish traps and sluice boxes, particularly those belonging to Tremper. He has become hard through Jared's repeated beatings. Finally he quarrels with his "father" and leaves with the dog Molly and her pups, which Jared wanted Jeff to drown.

For two years, Jeff goes from place to place in the Barrens, and ill luck follows him everywhere, all of it brought about by Bland, one of Jared's henchmen. Still Jeff maintains his respect for Jared, and is planning to surprise the man he believes to be his father with a huge catch of valuable furs, when his cabin

is burned by Bland. Discouraged but unbeaten, Jeff starts south as the first snow falls.

Jeff falls in with Donnybrook McDuff and his wood ticks at Hurricane Flat and learns what the initials CCC mean. McDuff tells him that there's a gold stampede in Kettle Creek and that Tremper and Jared will probably attempt to blanket the creek, so he decides to join the rush and do some blanketing himself—for himself and the CCC boys.

Jeff starts north with his dogs. On the boat he meets a chechahco—tenderfoot—named Stalling, and sees a girl, Lassie McDowell, who is referred to as "Bull Jared's girl," and to whom he is strangely drawn although he does not speak to her.

On all sides, men tell Jeff what a rascal Jared is, but his loyalty and respect are unshaken, and when he arrives at Glacier Cove and sees Jared on the beach, there is a glad reunion. However, Jared is incensed when Jeff tells him he is out to stake claims for the CCC boys, and tells the young man that he'll break him and his wood ticks, then hastens to greet Lassie McDowell. Old-timers recall Gloria laGrande, Bull's girl of another gold rush.

A big, hearty man stops and admires Jeff's team, and Jeff thinks he is the finest man he has ever met, but recoils when he learns the man is Buck Tremper. Tremper, however, seems to like the boy, despite his kinship with Jared.

Jeff is traveling light and soon overtakes most of the stampeders. He is ahead when he learns there is a shorter cut that Jared and Tremper have taken. He finally pulls past Jared's team and the sled on which Lassie McDowell rides.

Jared sets Bland on Jeff's trail again. When the first of the stampeders stop for the night, Bland frames Jeff as a cache robber and only quick action by Tremper and Lassie McDowell save him from hanging. However, he is branded "cache robber" and is turned back.

Returning to Glacier Cove Jeff comes across the frozen figures of a man and his team. The man is Stalling, whom he met on the boat. He decides to become Stalling and rejoin the stampede. He makes an exchange of clothing and sled and sets out again for Kettle Creek. Passing many of the stampeders, he comes upon Old Man Lynn, the victim of the cache robber, and continues his steady pace forward. Finally he realizes that he is leading the rush.

At last he reaches Kettle Creek and is greeted by Frank Cotter, the discoverer, who is delighted with the news that the CCC boys are coming. He tells Jeff that Tremper and Jared are on the way, adding that Tremper is "a good egg" but that he would like to keep Jared out of the camp. It is difficult for Jeff to remember that now he is Stalling.

Jeff stakes his claims and one for Stalling's wife, and then rushes to Glacier Cove to file his location notices and one for Old Man Lynn, who has agreed to remain on guard against claim jumpers. Jeff thinks he is the first to file, but the commissioner tells him that Jared filed weeks before.

Buck Tremper is in town and recognizes Jeff, but agrees not to reveal that Jeff is any other than Ted Stalling. When he returns to camp, Lassie McDowell, too, tells him that she knows he is the cache robber but will not betray him. He decides not to let Jared see him for a while.

Jared prepares to open his saloon and coaches his thugs that on the opening night when all the men in camp are at the Bonanza, they are

to "work fast while they are celebrating."

Jeff attends the Bonanza opening, drawn there by his interest in Lassie. While she sings, Cash Haley, a Hurricane Flat wood tick who has joined Jeff, bursts into the saloon with the news that the CCC claims are being jumped. He is hardly inside the door when a sniping shot floors him. Jeff turns and shoots the sniper but is himself wounded and falls on his face. Lassie McDowell orders him taken to his cabin before Jared can see who he is.

Jeff is badly wounded. Old Man Lynn decides he needs his wife and writes a leter. Lassie nurses Jeff and Lynn is concerned as he realizes the mutual affection growing between the girl and—as he believes—Stalling.

Jeff proposes and Lassie accepts, but she says she must finish the job she has to do before their engagement can be announced. That night, Jared resents her taking care of Stalling and reminds her that they are partners and that he expects to marry her. She demands a partnership agreement in writing, but holds off the wedding.

Jared learns Margaret Stalling is on her way, and meeting her on the trail, hurries her to camp. At the Stalling cabin, he looks through a window for his first glimpse of Stalling and discovers it is Jeff. He hastens to tell Lassie, but she will not believe Jeff is Jared's son. Jeff, however, admits it is true, and she breaks the engagement.

Jeff, well again, finds a bottle containing Jared's location claim buried in the snow covering one of his CCC sites. He finds similar bottles on other CCC sites and on the claim staked for Margaret Stalling, the bottle contains a notice written on an envelope bearing a post mark two weeks after the date Jeff had filed. Jeff confronts Jared with this evidence and Jared destroys it.

Old Man Lynn circulates a petition for a U. S. marshal and Bull Jared intercepts the messenger and substitutes Tremper's name for that of Lynn's selection.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN THE ICE WENT OUT.

JEFF and Old Man Lynn paused in their job of putting the finishing touches on a cabin for Margaret Stalling and read a letter a miner handed Lynn. "Holy smoke!" the old man ejaculated, "the powers that be have appointed Buck Tremper deputy marshal. Won't Jared roar when he hears it? You know how I feel about your father, Jeff. I can't help it."

Jeff said nothing when Jared was discussed these days. "Do you know," Lynn rambled on, "I'd have asked for Tremper in the first place only I figgered Jared would make such a roar that some weak sister would be appointed as a compromise, so I put Tim Stanford's name down."

"When will he arrive?" Jeff asked.

"The appointment came as a surprise. Buck's got some odds and ends to 'tend to, then he'll be here. The new jail will be finished by then. And we may be in it," he concluded. "I don't care what the location notices say, we staked this ground before Jared did. This is my last chance at real pay dirt. I'm too danged old to strike it again. Here I live, or here I die with a blazin' gun in my hand. And I'll tell Tremper so when he shows up."

He put the letter back into his pocket and yelled at Margaret Stalling, "You can move in any time now."

Jeff and Lynn had kept the wretched woman's mind occupied since her arrival. Lassie McDowell had dropped in frequently, but she always managed to make her calls when Jeff was away.

Occasionally they met. They were bound to meet in a camp hedged in by mountains. Invariably they talked about the prospects of a big clean-up. Lassie avoided all reference to their former feelings for each other and Jeff's plan of action included waiting until there was an opportunity to talk to Lassie alone.

The thoughts and emotions of Lassie, Jeff and even Jared were strangely similar. The girl believed Fate had planned not only the past and present, but also the future, ages ago. Once she was convinced it meant happiness for Jeff and herself. Happiness together—parallel trails. But being practical-minded, Lassie realized Fate did not always arrange matters with human happiness in mind. She was now convinced it was all a period of unhappiness—a trail of ordeal, perhaps—which must be endured.

Jeff, with the hope of those in love, clung desperately to the belief when the smoke of battle lifted, the atmosphere would clear and there would be mutual understanding. As for Jared, the immediate future held for him his hour of triumph—the last of a series of progressive steps which began when Buck Tremper caught him robbing a sluice box and had continued through to the present time.

At the time, he had promised Tremper there would be a day of reckoning. Nursing his revenge had been meat and drink to him as Jeff grew to manhood. "When I set 'em at each other," he thought, "it's going to be worth all the years I've waited. And when it's over, I'll be disappointed because my hour is behind and not ahead of me."

A lifetime of treacherous dealings on the frontier had taught him the uncertainty of the best-laid plans. Alone in his office, with the uproar of the saloon undertone he hardly heard, Jared considered the possibility of a slip that might, in an instant, reverse the situation.

"Jeff can talk until he's black in the face and a court will give me those claims," Jared reasoned. "If he holds onto the ground he'll have to fight. The law will be lined up with me. Buck Tremper will hate the idea of fighting my battle. But he'll do it. A man who has always fought for law and order wouldn't do anything else. He couldn't. But if the miners get the upper hand, it's just as well to have some rough and ready boys handy to throw in at the right time. I've seventeen now—I'll get twenty-five or thirty more."

He left the office and went slowly through the saloon, mechanically answering the greetings of those he passed. He found the man he wanted sitting at a small, corner table moodily drinking straight rum from a square bottle. The North called him "Cruncher" Bullock, a man of mystery.

BULLOCK stood five feet, ten inches, but his abnormally wide shoulders and barrel chest made him look shorter. It was his boast no man had ever knocked him off his feet. His short, thick neck drew his bullet head into the protection of his shoulders. It was almost impossible to crash a fist against his jaw. Many a man had broken his hands on Bullock's head trying it.

The man's short arms prevented his keeping an attacker at a distance. But the murderous strength in those

same arms enabled him to literally crush the life from a man if he offered resistance. And there were stories of crushed bodies found floating in the harbors of Alaskan towns the man frequented—the bodies of men who had quarreled with him.

He said little when Jared seated himself, merely gripping his glass with his short fingers and gazing, without emotion, at his employer. "A job for you, Cruncher," Jared said. "Light out for Glacier Cove and pick the kind of men I need to get hold of that ground if Buck Tremper doesn't turn the trick."

"It's done, Bull," Bullock responded. He gulped down another shot of rum.

"Grudging with your words as usual," Jared observed. "Keeping your mouth shut has paid you big dividends. Jeff's representing a group of CCC boys. They'll probably come over the trail before the break-up. Can you stop them?"

"They're stopped," Bullock answered. "I'll need a couple of cases of dynamite. Still, why waste powder on a bunch of punk kids?"

"That's a long speech for you, Cruncher," Jared said. "It's your job. Handle it your own way. I'll give you what you need. Don't worry about the expense. The Bonanza is the real gold mine so far, and I've got plenty of money."

"I'll crunch 'em," Bullock promised. His deep-set eyes narrowed. "The weather's gettin' warmer. It wouldn't surprise me if there'd be bad slides in the gorge down the crook. Wouldn't it be terrible if a slide filled the canyon so nobody could get into the country until the ice went out?"

"It would be terrible," Jared agreed. "It would be worse, though, if the slide caught the CCC boys who've filed on this land."

"I'd thought of that," Bullock said. He lowered his eyes to the empty glass, refilled it, then drained it.

Jared sauntered off. He knew Cruncher.

Neither Jared nor Cruncher observed the window directly behind the latter had been forced open an eighth of an inch. Outside the snow had drifted high and irregularly against the log walls. The windowpane was covered with moisture and the two men failed to see the figure crouched between two drifts, with ear pressed close to the slit afforded by the slightly raised window.

The figure presently drifted into a cabin, scrawled a note on a piece of wrapping paper, and left it under Jeff's door. It read:

JEFF:
If you're wise you'll get your CCC men here immediately. Watch out for slides in the gorge.

Jeff read it through carefully. "I wonder who sent it? I must have a friend in dad's camp." He called in Old Man Lynn for an opinion.

"If it's from a friend," the old fellow declared, "it should be acted on. If it's from an enemy—well, you'll have to out-fox 'em that's all." He opened the cabin door and let the breeze stream in. "There's a touch of spring in the air," he said. "The break-up is near, and that means slides. You'd better get a move on."

Jeff harnessed his team for the last trip over the snow until the following fall. The trail between Kettle Creek and Glacier Cove was now almost glare ice. The steady flow of heavily-burdened sleds had packed the snow until it was no longer snow.

Every half mile or so Jeff had to turn out and give way to an incoming freighter. No man knew what the Kettle Creek country would be like

in late spring and summer, and so the traders were stocking up with provisions. From the swift descent of the creek they knew it would be almost impossible to pole a flat boat up the stream. There were too many boulders to permit steamboating. "And we'll come back loaded, too," Jeff reflected.

Again he found Glacier Cove had grown since his last visit. Steamers discharged passengers and freight; real estate men continued to open up new additions in virgin forests of spruce. There was talk of installing a telephone exchange.

Jeff saw Buck Tremper. The big sourdough was loading supplies on a heavy sled. A string of dogs of assorted sizes, weights and colors were strung out in a makeshift harness.

"Hello, Jeff!" Tremper bellowed. "What do you think of my team?"

"There should be safety in numbers," Jeff admitted. "What did you do, gather up all the unwanted dogs in camp?"

"Yes, and stole three off of steamers," Tremper admited. "This deputy marshal appointment took me by surprise. I want to get my supplies in before the ice goes out. Tim Stanford should have had the job. The good Lord knows I didn't want it. But they put the proposition up in a way that I pretty near had to accept."

Again Jeff was conscious of Tremper's eyes searching his face—searching with a hint of desperation. Something in their expression haunted Jeff on their previous encounter, and he knew the expression would haunt him for weeks to come. "A face that has suffered. Queer, but I can't help liking that man."

"I suppose you're here to meet your wood ticks?" Tremper observed.

"Are they coming?"

"I got word yesterday thirty-five of them have finished their enrollment and are headed for Kettle Creek. A fellow named Donnybrook McDuff is with them," Tremper answered. "And by the way, they've done a great job of trail-building in that swamp country. The material has been freighted over the ice to distribution points; grub caches built and stocked. Now all they've got to do this summer is to connect up the different units. A couple of hundred more are coming in from Seattle next week."

SEVERAL days later Jeff watched a group of men wearing the CCC uniform swarm over a steamer's side and into two lifeboats. As the first boat touched shore, Donnybrook McDuff, alert and handsome, jumped to the beach. "Hello, Jeff!" he bellowed. "Where's our gold mines?"

They shook hands and Jeff looked over the new arrivals. In every group of men there are one or more who stand out; who instantly catch the eye because of personality, physical bulk or intelligence. In this group Jeff was instantly impressed by two. One of them stood six feet, seven inches tall. He had coal-black hair, blue eyes and a rugged, handsome face. The fight in his eyes was an odd conflict of easy-going tolerance and the blaze of revolt. No "issue" uniform could hope to fit him. As a result his pants were too short and his sleeves ended well above his wrists. Two of the largest fists Jeff had ever seen hung from his thick wrists.

"This is Two-story Dan McGraw," Donnybrook said by the way of introduction. "He is heavyweight champion of the CCC in Alaska."

"He's heavyweight champion of

all the CCC," the second man who had caught Jeff's eye declared.

"Meet Blast Hagen," said "Two-story." "He's wrestling champion of *all* the CCC. He's five feet five inches tall and weighs two hundred pounds."

"No," "Blast" Hagen objected with a modesty he had not displayed in speaking of his partner's accomplishments, "I'm only champion of the Hurricane Flat outfit."

"That's just because you haven't met the others," Two-story explained. "Jeff, we hear there may be a brawl or two."

"Brawl?" Jeff exclaimed. "You'll get enough fighting to last you a lifetime."

"We never have yet," Two-story insisted. "Understand, we don't go around looking for trouble. Live and let live, is our motto. But," he concluded in a significant tone, "we don't let nobody make a pass at us or our friends."

Jeff led the way to the trading post. He loaded each man with all he could carry, heaped supplies on the sled, added a pack to his own back and started for Kettle Creek that night.

"Donnybrook," Two-story rumbled in his foghorn voice, "I like that cuss, Jeff. He don't let any grass grow under his feet."

"You realize now why he wouldn't stand for you boys going on the stampede. You weren't trail-wise yet," Donnybrook said.

"I guess we all realize it now," Two-story conceded. "If you and Jeff hadn't stopped us, those who weren't dead right now would be facing life minus arms and legs. And we wouldn't be cutting in on the biggest stampede since the Klondike."

When Jeff felt he really knew the men he called them about him. Most of the trail lay behind. Ahead stretched the river into which Kettle Creek flowed. Already the ice was betraying signs of unrest. Deep groans thundered through the valley as the frozen mass resisted the pressure of contraction and expansion as the temperature changed. Jagged cracks ran along the surface and here and there water flowed through, flooding the immediate area.

"Before we go into what's ahead of us," Jeff began, "I want to know how much faith you have in me?"

"There's no limit, Jeff," Donnybrook replied instantly.

"It's going to test your faith plenty," Jeff bluntly admitted. "You've got to believe I'm fighting my own father, Bull Jared."

"You staked the ground first, didn't you?" Two-story asked.

"Yes, but the record shows he was several weeks ahead of me," Jeff replied. Then he explained what had happened.

They listened in silence and exchanged glances when he had finished. "It's like this, Jeff," Two-story said, and Blast Hagen confirmed his partner's words with a nod. "We think you're on the level. It's going to take plenty to prove you're not. When you left Hurricane Flat you told Donnybrook to keep us there, and train us until we were as smart and tough as wolves from the Barrens. Donnybrook thinks we turned out pretty well. So, if you are crooked you're going to have a pack of wolves on you. And there isn't a place in the North you can hide that we can't find you." He waved his ponderous hand. "Lead off, Jeff, and we'll back your hand."

"Thanks," Jeff answered.

He crossed the river, followed the

bank and turned into Kettle Creek. They camped at the mouth that night and approached the gorge early the following morning. The days were long and the nights brief. The warm sun had flooded the higher slopes for several hours, but in the deep, narrow gorge it was cold. Rocks and a few pieces of driftwood that had jammed during a freshet the previous spring were glazed with ice.

Ahead snowy slopes on either side were not visible from the bottom of the gorge. All Jeff saw when he looked up was a hard, blue sky and a soaring eagle. A shudder ran through his body. "There it is again," he complained. "The queer feeling I have whenever I see an eagle! I always feel on the defensive when I see them." He glanced up again and waited for the others to join him. "I was warned of slides," he said, "and this is the worst stretch. Things may happen here in this gorge."

Donnybrook McDuff looked up. "All I see are hanging glaciers and deep snow. It looks safe enough."

"Just to play safe," Jeff said, "we'll go through one at a time!"

"Dirty work at the crossroads, eh?" Blast Hagen questioned, sensing Jeff was dubious about the mass of ice and snow a thousand feet above.

"I'll start. When I'm through one of you follow. If you hear any disturbance sprint," Jeff directed.

"*You* won't do much sprinting with that load," Blast predicted. "I'll give you a hand."

There was logic in Blast's argument. Jeff doubted if any man in the North could put more power behind a sled than the wrestler. "All right, Molly," he yelled, "Mush!"

As the dogs leaped into the harness the two men hurled their weight against the sled. The ponderous load began moving. "Let's keep it going," Blast urged. "Do our sprinting from scratch."

THE others trailed them into the gorge to the first turn and stopped. Here they were safe, yet could watch what transpired ahead. Neither man spoke, but with breasts against the load, dug in with their feet and kept digging. Faster and fasted moved the sled. The dogs were down almost to their bellies. Trained from puppyhood by Jeff each was responsive to the man's sense of danger. "There's a quarter mile of it," Jeff panted.

A moment later the walls shook, either from a blast, or the shattering of ice above them. Neither man looked up. If death came it would come without their seeing it, and seconds counted—seconds and ounces of strength.

Crash after crash followed as thousands of tons of ice and snow shifted, held briefly and shifted again. A boulder cleared the crest of the gorge, smashed against the opposite wall then struck the ice a hundred yards behind them.

The roar of the avalanche forming above was deafening. Blast Hagen tried to speak, but shook his head. His lips said, "Too much noise."

Panic swept through the team. Attached to the sled the dogs realized their only chance lay in taking the sled with them to safety. Jeff nudged Blast's arm and pointed ahead. His lips said, "Run for it."

A tight smile flashed across Blast's strong features. His back bowed and the sled moved a little faster.

Loose snow fell about them and on

sheer momentum the sled smashed through it to the clear ice beyond. A blast of air struck their backs as the avalanche spilled over the crest and filled the canyon fifty feet deep with ice and snow, mixed with boulders and frozen earth.

The dogs dropped to their feet in exhaustion, the sled slithered to a stop. The two men looked back. A shoulder of rock prevented snow from reaching them at this point. For several moments neither spoke. "That was a blast," Hagen said at last. "A charge of powder blew out a toe holding the ice. The law of gravity did the rest. It was timed to catch the outfit. That didn't just happen, Jeff."

"You're right, Blast," Jeff agreed. "And if we hadn't started running from scratch as you suggested we'd be right there now."

Following slides filled the gorge to a depth of over two hundred feet. "Donnybrook, Two-story and the rest won't be able to get over that," Blast growled. "But don't worry. They'll turn back, detour and climb over the mountains. They'll *drop* in on us some of these days. When do you think that slide will go out?"

"The ice will go out, the waters of Kettle Creek will pile up behind it, and when there is pressure enough out she'll go. Dynamite might help," Jeff added. "But it will be weeks before the stream is clear." He stirred the dogs into action. "We might as well go into camp," he said.

Jeff and Blast awakened the following morning to the beat of rain against the windows. Water was running off everything and the trails from cabins to the settlement which had served them all winter became ditches or flowing rain and melting snow. The Bonanza made no effort to open up. The dealers, bartenders and entertainers gathered in the saloon and watched the rain.

Jared sat in his office talking to Cruncher. "And you're sure you got 'em?" he asked. "I saw Jeff and a wood tick in camp this morning."

"The party went into the gorge. I timed the fuse so they'd be halfway through when the blast let go. And —she let go," Cruncher explained. "But I didn't know Jeff was with 'em. I don't know what I'd have done if I'd recognized him. Your orders didn't include trappin' him."

"He was lucky, that's all," Jared answered. "Well, I guess there's nothing to do until the ice goes out." He walked over to the window and stared at the new jail and commissioner's office. The letters, "United States Marshal," freshly painted on one of the windows met his gaze. Buck Tremper, tilted back in a homemade chair, was visible. As he watched, Buck stood up, looked at his watch, then pulled on rubber boots and slicker. He left the office, walked across to Lassie McDowell's cabin, knocked and was admitted.

"Hell," Jared exploded, "Tremper had a date with her. Now what have they got to talk about?"

Jared dressed in his own rubber clothing and stepped outside. He scowled with resentment. There wasn't a chance of his eavesdropping without being observed. "Well whatever it is," he grumbled, "it won't do them any good. I've got everything bottled up—Jeff's ground, Jeff's father, and Jeff's girl."

Jared, Jeff, Margaret Stalling and the others watched the snow, under the warm drenching rain, slowly leave the exposed areas. Boulders, stunted trees and shrubs came to light within a few days. Jeff's monuments cut on trees looked oddly out

of place fifteen and even twenty feet above ground.

Jared's corner stakes with the location notices in liquor bottles appeared at last. As if Nature had done her part in lifting the curtain of snow for the last act of the drama, the rain stopped. The sun came out and the world began to steam.

Water and ice were roaring down Kettle Creek from bank to bank and at times overflowing. A lake formed behind the ice dam in the gorge, crawled to within sight of the Bonanza.

"It's a good thing the rain stopped, Lassie," Jared said, "or we'd be flooded in two or three days. Say, what'd Tremper want with you the other day?"

"He said he understood I had half interest in the Bonanza and he warned me if the place wasn't run according to law, there would be arrests," Lassie answered. "There was nothing personal in the warning, he assured me. He said it was the same he would give to all entertainment establishments."

"I see," Jared observed, only half convinced. "So he wants to give his authority a work-out, eh? Well, I'll give him the chance of a lifetime. I'm ready to move in on my claims. The ice has gone out and the location notices are there for the world to see."

CHAPTER XV.

BULL JARED'S HOUR.

OLD MAN LYNN in a state of excitement hurried over to Jeff's cabin. "Jared's comin'! Be here soon!"

"It looks like the show-down," Jeff answered quietly.

"When it comes to shooting," Blast Hagen said, "Let me do it. Your own—father——" He faltered, then regained his composure. "Say, why not let me handle this, Jeff?"

"No, the fight is mine," Jeff answered.

He watched Jared splash through patches of drenched snow, then cut across toward his cabin. Jared carried a rifle in his hands and his eyes roved from side to side, watching for signs of attack from the few independent miners in the vicinity. As he had located some of their ground also, it was natural, he reasoned, they would back Jeff's play.

"Get off my land," Jared roared at Jeff in a voice that carried a half mile.

"You know this isn't your land," Jeff retorted. "We're holding it! That's final." He looked beyond Jared's bulking form to the Bonanza. The windows were black with Jared's employees watching the affair. "And ready to move in as soon as the fight starts," Jeff thought. "I'd give anything for a few good men."

"This is final?" Jared demanded.

"Yes," Jeff replied.

Jared turned on his heel and went directly to the marshal's office. "Tremper, I demand you throw all claim jumpers off my ground. If you need proof, look at the commissioner's records, then my corner monuments."

As he finished speaking Jeff barged into the room. "I'll tell you how he located that ground," he roared. He related everything that had happened.

"That's a lie," Jared shouted. "This kid of mine can't take defeat. He's trying to pull off a bluff. Well, Tremper, are you going to throw him off or not?"

"Jeff," Tremper said, "it isn't right for a boy to fight his own father. I want to talk with you. Jared, come back in a half hour."

Jared stalked away and it was

with difficulty he concealed a grin. Things were working out as he intended. "Tremper and his kid couldn't do it better if they'd rehearsed it," he said with satisfaction.

A half hour later he returned, eager and bristling. "Well, what's the answer?" he demanded.

"Tremper," Jeff was saying, "a lot of people hard-up are backing the kids who backed me. I tell you Jared destroyed the location notice that would prove my point. I'm not quitting. That's my ground, and I'm playing the hand through. That's final."

"And this is final, Jeff," Tremper declared with a steel-trap click of his jaw. "Unless you are off that ground to-morrow noon I'll remove you by force." He turned to Jared. "Is that satisfactory?"

"Plenty," Jared answered.

He returned to the Bonanza. "No matter what happens to-morrow," he said, "you men keep out of it until I give the word. Don't even leave the place. Is that clear?"

They nodded. Jared went down to Lassie's cabin. He was traveling on the momentum of triumph now. Roughly he drew the girl into his arms. "You're cold these days," he said. "What's the matter? What've I done?"

"Oh, I guess it is because there is so much unrest," the girl answered.

"Buck Tremper is going to quiet things down," Jared said. "He's just talked to Jeff. But how about us? The Bonanza is worth sixty thousand dollars as she stands. I was offered that by Ken Forster yesterday. And that's only a drop in the bucket. I'm ready to buy the diamonds I said you'd wear if you'd marry me. How about it?"

"When I'm ready, Bull," she answered, "I'll marry you, but I won't be ready for a month."

"A month!" he exclaimed. "As soon as that? That's fine."

He sauntered back to his office, his head in the clouds. "Things are working out in great shape," he exclaimed. "And twenty-four hours after we're married, I'll get that partnership agreement from her. Just in case she changes her mind, or we can't make a go of it. Nobody cuts in on Bull Jared's gold."

Jared and the entire camp marked time until the following noon. At twelve o'clock, Buck Tremper buckled on his well-worn belt and holsters. The butts of his six-guns waited within easy reach of his hands. His face betrayed no fear, only a terrible, repressed emotion.

Wherever he looked he saw men standing in the open, or with faces pressed to cabin windows. Only Jeff's cabin betrayed no sign of life. But it was not empty. The whole camp knew that Blast Hagen and Old Man Lynn were in there with Jeff.

Jared, keeping cover between himself and the scene of the show-down, slunk to within a hundred yards of Jeff's claim. Screened by a thicket he could see and not be seen.

BUCK TREMPER stopped in front of Jeff's door, and it seemed to Jared his own heart stopped beating. Mechanically Jared reached into his shirt pocket and touched a folded piece of paper that had once been in a shipwrecked child's pocket. It was soiled and the writing on it was fading.

Buck's voice cracked the terrible silence on the land. "In the name of the law, Jeff Jared, I order you to——"

The door opened. "Keep out of this, Blast. And you, too, Lynn. The responsibility is mine," Jeff yelled over his shoulder.

"I don't want any trouble, Jeff," Tremper said.

"Then get off this claim!" Jeff rasped. His hand lifted and his six-gun covered Tremper's breast. The gun was as steady as if it had been held in a vise. Tremper's hand stole toward his own weapons. "Don't go for that gun, Tremper, or I'll let you have it. Put up your hands."

Tremper's hands went up, but the right carried a six-gun with it. The weapon almost covered Jeff. It was a fraction of a second late and in that fraction Jeff's gun roared. Tremper's head snapped back in a spasmodic jerk, then his gun slipped from his shaking fingers. To the watchers it seemed an eternity before he fell. Another eternity passed before Jeff holstered his smoking gun and walked over to the fallen man.

"You shouldn't have gone this far, Jeff," Jared shouted hoarsely as he ran from cover. "You've killed a deputy marshal." There was disappointment in Jared's voice. "I figured it would be Tremper who killed Jeff!" he said to himself.

"Give me a hand," Jeff said. They carried the marshal into Jeff's cabin. "Go for the doctor, Blast," he ordered. "Lynn, you run over to Margaret Stalling's place. She knows something about nursing."

Jeff and Jared stared at the crimson stain covering Tremper's shirt front. Tremper's eyes opened slowly. "I can't breathe," he gasped. "My lungs!"

His face turned purple as though paralysis stopped the action of his lungs. His cheeks sucked in and out from the struggle for air.

"Get some water, Jeff," Jared said. As Jeff disappeared a slow grin spread over Jared's face. "Remember, Tremper, when you caught me robbing that sluice box? We were both young then. Don't try to answer. You remember all right. I said I'd get you and I'd take plenty of time doing it."

Jeff's step sounded outside the door. Jared jerked Tremper's handcuffs from his pocket, drew his own six-gun and thrust the muzzle in Jeff's stomach, then he snapped the cuffs on the upraised hands. "Have a chair," Jared ordered. Jeff sat down and Jared lashed him to it.

"I've got to talk fast," Jared said, "or Tremper will cash in. I robbed your salmon traps and stirred up labor troubles for you as part of my revenge. I tried to discredit you with the pubic, Tremper, and almost succeeded. I heard your brother was coming North, bringing your kid with him, and I planned to get Vance. The ship was wrecked."

Jared leaned closer to Tremper's purple face. "Well, Tremper, you never gave up hope. As for you, Jeff, you weren't wrong when you had a faint picture of dogs fighting off big birds. A dog did fight off an eagle that was trying to get you. And you did see a man's face smiling at you from the brass rim of a porthole."

Jared stopped and looked hard at Tremper. "Are you getting this?"

"Yes," Tremper gasped. "Every word!" He struggled desperately for air.

"Jeff was dropped into a boat with a dog," Jared continued. "We picked up the boat, and found the baby with this in his pocket."

He read:

"I'm dropping this boy through a porthole into a boat. If, through fright, he forgets his name it is Jeff Tremper. Communicate with his father, Buck Tremper, at the Keystone Mine.

"It was signed 'Vance Tremper,'" he concluded.

Jared held the paper up for Tremper's inspection. "Vance's handwriting," he gasped. "Jeff——"

"Shut up!' Jared ordered.

He expected Tremper to die any moment and he hurried on. "I never believed blood tells. Give me any kid and I'll make a wolverine out of him. Lashings wouldn't do it. Neither would education. He got both, and grew up with sentiment for dogs and ideals." Jared sneered. "But he grew up hating you, Tremper. But that wasn't enough."

"No, it wasn't enough, you rat," Jeff roared. "You planned to get your final revenge by tricking me into killing my own father."

"Exactly," Jared admitted. "That's why I arranged to have him appointed deputy marshal instead of Tim Stanford. And you've killed your own father. He's going to die. And the law can't do a thing to me. You had no business resisting an officer."

He smiled mirthlessly. "Think back, Tremper, when you caught me at a sluice box and organized a miner's trial. And remember when you die, your brat will swing for your murder. And if you repeat my words in court, Jeff, I'll deny them." He walked to the door, turned and saluted them. "To your thoughts, gentlemen." Then he was gone.

Buck Tremper's mouth popped open and his lungs sucked in a mighty volume of air. His feet swung clear of the bunk and he jumped up. He slashed the lashings on Jeff's arms and legs, then unlocked the handcuffs. "Jeff, son," he exclaimed, "we tricked him into admitting the truth. A blank cartridge and a little red ink fooled him. I never lost hope. Never! Why, kid, with that beard on you were a dead ringer for me. Then Lassie told me of certain things you said when you were wounded—things your subconscious mind released. And I knew you were my Jeff."

He hugged Jeff and then looked hard at him. "I'm afraid even now I'll wake up and find it a dream. I've awakened in the dark hours of night so many times and—found it a dream." He caught his breath hard.

Jeff shook his father's wide shoulders. "Does that seem like a dream?" he asked, huskily.

"Son, you're real. You're flesh, bone, and blood. My flesh, bone, and blood." For a long time they looked at each other in silence, then Buck Tremper blurted. "And it's always been claimed our breed doesn't cry. Well, it does at a time like this—inwardly, not out loud."

CHAPTER XVI.

BLUE TICKETS.

OLD MAN LYNN and Blast Hagen ran into Jeff's cabin, followed by Doc Baldwin and Margaret Stalling. The four stared in astonishment. "What in tarnation does this mean?" Lynn demanded. "I told doc just now Tremper was deader'n a door nail."

"And I backed him up," Blast added.

"It means we pulled a fast one on Jared," Jeff explained, "and cashed in on his hour of revenge. He admitted Buck Tremper is my father."

"Boy, that is a relief," Lynn exclaimed. "But why didn't you grab the cuss while you had a chance?"

"It would have been too risky with Jeff tied up and me unarmed," Tremper explained. "He'd have killed us both then sworn he killed Jeff because he resisted arrest for my murder." He panted heavily. "But don't make me talk. I held my

breath to make him think my lungs were paralyzed, and can't seem to get it back."

"Buck, suppose you think while we talk. This fight isn't over. It's victory for you because you've found your son, but it isn't victory for us until the whole Jared outfit is chased out of camp," Old Man Lynn said. "There's eight or nine of us, includin' a couple of old ruins like me. What chance have we got against Jared's mob? Besides, Tremper, you're the law and have to be on Jared's side."

"I was the law," Buck Tremper answered. "I accepted my appointment with the understanding it would expire at one o'clock to-day. After that I wanted to have a free hand. That's why Jeff and I agreed on twelve o'clock for the show-down. We talked it all over when I discussed with him the matter of fighting his own father."

"I think we should stick close to the cabin and wait for Jared's next move," Jeff said.

The move took place forty-eight hours later when Jared inquired about funeral plans. "Maybe he didn't die," Cruncher ventured.

"He couldn't have lived five minutes after I left him," Jared insisted. "I've shot men through the lungs. I know their reaction. Tremper was blue in the face. His heart was ready to quit any minute. No, Jeff's just waiting for the dam to break so he can make a run for it."

"He isn't going to make a run for it," Jared declared, "I'm going to chase him into the open. Come on, Cruncher." He picked several others and started for Jeff's cabin.

"Jared," Jeff shouted, "you've got twenty-four hours to get out of camp. Also, if you set foot on any claim in this group we're going to let daylight through you. That goes for your men, too."

"And I'm backing him up in this, Jared," Bull Tremper said appearing at the window. "I've always wanted to fight at a son's side and never more so than at the present time."

"But—but—you——" Jared faltered.

"Jeff fired a blank," Tremper interrupted. "Now clear out."

Jared returned to the Bonanza. "All right, boys," he said, "you're hired to fight. Get out there to-morrow and earn your pay. Make them fire the first shot. We've got the law on our side, you know. But I want an excuse that will stand in court. Remember, let them fire the first shot. Our reputation would be against us if an Alaskan jury tried us."

Cruncher rubbed his big fists. "Let's take 'em to-night while it's dark."

Twilight deepened into darkness and Jared's men began grouping in the saloon. A half hour later they advanced on Jeff's cabin which commanded the entire group of CCC claims.

Blast Hagen, with his eyes peering through an opening in the walls, turned and said, "Jeff, they've decided to choose us. Here they come! Now when the fight starts, let this here Cruncher choose me. I've heard he's good."

"Remember," Jeff warned, "we're on the wrong side of the law in this fight. Let them fire the first shot."

"Sure," Blast said. "And after that it'll be self-defense. Man! Man! I sure wish Two-story McGraw was here."

"We need him," Jeff admitted.

"Need him? We don't need anybody," Blast announced. "But Two-story does have such fun in a fight."

There were nine in the cabin, including Old Man Lynn, who had armed himself with a pick handle. "I was a section gang boss in the days when they built the U. P. trail," he explained. "I learned the value of a pick handle then."

Jared, Cruncher and a half dozen rushed the door. "Let 'em in!" Blast urged.

"No, we might not close it again," Jeff answered. "Then they'd all be in here."

"What of it?" Blast asked.

Buck Tremper chuckled. "I like Blast's nerve, but his strategy is unsound, Jeff. We've got to win this fight. And they outnumber us four to one."

Jeff rushed to the window, ready to repel attack from that quarter. He looked beyond to a hogback leading to the higher country. Suddenly he stared, then grinned broadly. "Let's postpone this scrap a half hour," he suggested.

"They've set the cabin afire," Old Man Lynn yelled.

JEFF now realized the attack on the door had been a blind to give others an opportunity to build a fire against the back wall. Smoke sifted between the logs and with it tongues of flame.

"Punch a couple of holes in the roof to let out the smoke," Jeff ordered. "We'll stay in here as long as we can. The logs are green and will burn slowly."

The fire blazed high for fifteen minutes, then died down as the fuel stacked against the walls burned. Cruncher and another raced in and dumped fresh fuel on the flames. "We'll smoke out the rats this time," he boomed.

"I'd sure like to go out and choose that bird," Blast Hagen growled. "What's the matter, Jeff? What's the sense in waiting? We've got to go out anyway."

"Come here, Blast," Jeff said. He led the way to the window and pointed.

"Oh, oh!" Blast exclaimed as he looked in the direction Jeff was pointing . "That's just swell!"

The flames got a real hold this time and a sheet of fire burst into the room. "Come on, boys," Buck Tremper yelled. "We can't stand any more of this."

"Just keep those mugs offn my back," Blast said, "and I'll give my undivided time to what's in front of me."

The husky CCC wrestler fell in behind Buck Tremper. Jeff followed. "I'll wait inside a second longer," Old Man Lynn said. "I'll do better snipin' em."

As the eight men rushed into the open, a howl of joy came from Jared's men. They rushed in from all angles—some forty men surrounding eight. Blast broke from the circle and dived head-first into the nearest man. The fellow folded up with a sickening grunt. Blast's arms went about him, heaved up and crashed him to the ground. "He's through," he exclaimed.

"Keep together," Jeff yelled. Blast backed into the ring. He had tasted blood and wanted more. But he realized if the ring was once broken the battle would be over in a few seconds.

"Into them," Jared ordered. "Smash, hard. Break that circle, Cruncher. Leave Tremper to me."

Old Man Lynn broke from cover and circled the mob like a stalking wolf. His club crashed down and a man dropped. A second and third went down, then one of Jared's men jerked the club from the old man's hands and crashed it onto his head.

He kept the cub and rushed at

Blast. The latter stepped inside the blow, kicked him in the stomach then crashed a fist against the man's jaw. "He's through," he grunted. "That's the advantage of being built close together. You can fire with hands and feet at the same time."

Jared brought a gun butt down on a sourdough's head and the human wall broke. Cruncher crashed through, with the intention of running wild. He found himself face to face with a man built along similar lines. "You're Cruncher," the man growled. "I'm Blast!" His fist sunk deep into Cruncher's muscled stomach and bounced back again.

Cruncher crashed his fist over Blast's heart. No man had ever stood up under that blow. Blast grunted. "Cut out the love pats and fight, you mug," he rasped.

As if by mutual consent the others left Cruncher and Blast to fight it out, while Buck Tremper and Jared instinctively worked toward each other. Jeff kept his back against his father's and tried to keep the ring of men together. He had his hands full and when three men centered an attack on the man beside Jeff he realized the fight was almost hopeless. The poor fellow went down, and the three who had swept him aside pulled Jeff down.

"Stay with it," he panted, slowly getting to his feet. "We've got to last a few minutes longer."

He got up in time to see Blast's fist bounce off Cruncher's chin. The latter swayed like a falling tree. Twice more Blast drove in terriffic jabs that snapped and seemed to explode. Cruncher, who had never been knocked off his feet, crumpled.

Blast turned and faced an avalance of Jared's men. Jeff hurled himself into the thick of it. Fists struck him from several angles and lights danced. He went down, started to get up, then some one snarled, "I'll bet you stay down this time." A foot struck Jeff's face.

He tried to get up, but strength left him. In the distance he heard high pitched shouts. "Wolves," he muttered, "wolves from the barrens."

Blast caught his arm and heaved up. He got Jeff to his feet and balanced his limp body. "You can't miss this, Jeff," he said thickly. "Those lights you saw coming down the ridge were Two-story and the boys all right enough. I knew they'd get through. Can you stand?"

"Stand?" Jeff muttered. "Boy, I can fight!"

DAYS of struggle, with a touch of hunger, had put the CCC boys in a fighting mood. The huge Two-story stalked about, beating down the hardest of men with his mighty fists. The others pitched into any one in sight, and when the first Jared man retreated, several CCC men circled him like cowpunchers riding herd on a steer. He was forced back in again.

"What'll we do now?" Two-story demanded in a hurt voice. "There are no more men on their feet."

"There's two," Jared panted. "Tremper and me. And soon there'll only be me."

Jared jumped backwards. Tremper had battered him badly and had received a battering in return. Jared's right hand was badly swollen, but he was as good with his left in a gunfight. The left hand went for his gun.

"Look out, dad," Jeff warned. "He's——"

Yellow flame stabbed from Jared's gun, and Buck Tremper half spun around. The gun in his right hand shook. He shifted it to his left as Jared fired again, then with teeth

set and deadly calm, Tremper fired. Jared's gun dropped and he tottered, amazement written in his eyes. In this final moment of his life a promise Buck Tremper had made many years ago came to him for the first time. "If you ever draw a gun on me, Jared, I'll get you if it's the last thing I do." And Tremper had made good his promise.

"You," Jared began, his face twisting with hate, "you——" Then he pitched forward, dead.

"I'm not badly hurt, boys," Buck Tremper assured them. "Jared was too eager or he'd have killed me. Thanks, Jeff, for keeping out of the fight. It was my fight—from the first."

Margaret Stalling came with bandages and set to work, while an angry mob of miners yelled, "String up the Jared outfit!" The CCC boys, grinning through their battered features, formed a ring which prevented the Jared men from escaping. And protected them from the mob.

"There'll be no lynching," Buck Tremper said. It was an echo of a command he had given before when Jared had stood with a rope about his neck.

Some one brought Buck Tremper a chair and he sat down heavily and organized a miners' court immediately, a court that would deal out the swift, impartial justice of the old West. "Now, Jeff," he directed, "submit your evidence."

Jeff told of the post-marked piece of paper he had found in the bottle and then, on a gamble, began naming names, confident at least one of Jared's rats would crack. Three of them, in an effort to save their skins, began talking at once. "He's right," one of them agreed when Buck Tremper had selected a speaker from the trio, "we jumped the ground, but it was at Jared's orders. Jeff, here, staked that ground first."

"String 'em up!" a miner roared.

"Silence," Buck Tremper shouted. "Jared's dead and his ring smashed up. This confession clears Jeff's title and that's what we wanted. I sentence the lot of you to a *blue ticket.*"

"What's that?" one of the CCC boys asked.

"It means they're banished from Kettle Creek forever," Jeff explained. "To-morrow we'll blast out that ice dam and the Jared outfit will follow the ice downstream."

Jeff left the group and walked slowly toward Lassie McDowell's cabin. A half light was touching the higher peaks. A new and better day was dawning. "If you're looking for me, Jeff," the girl said from the shadows of a thicket, "I am here. I had to stay close in case—you were hurt."

"Queer girl," he said gently, "you refuse to marry me and yet you helped me fight Jared. Right now I'm thinking of a note I received, written in a disguised hand, warning me to watch out for slides. I'm sure you wrote it. It saved a number of lives, including mine."

"I couldn't help much, Jeff," she said, "but I did what I could, and writing the note was something. I was afraid of Jared. And believing you to be his son, well—I couldn't marry a man who might inherit Jared's ruthless traits of character."

"But will you marry Buck Tremper's son?" Jeff asked, smiling down.

"If—he wants me," Lassie answered.

"Want you?" Jeff blurted the words, then swept her into his arms. "I've wanted you from the day I laid eyes on you. But—why did you

ever become his partner? And, of course, you realize you now own the Bonanza."

"I came North to get my hands on any saloon or dance hall Jared might build," she explained. "And for no other reason. And I couldn't afford to let even my love for you stop me."

"And you took a chance on him after what happened to Gloria laGrande?" Jeff asked.

"I did it for Gloria laGrande," Lassie replied. "It was a way of collecting a debt long due her, and it insured her comfort in her remaining years."

It was lighter now and the battered CCC boys were shoveling gravel in an effort to dig their first gold. Their enthusiasm promised a great camp, but neither Jeff nor Lassie noticed them.

"You must think a lot of Gloria," Jeff said.

"I do," Lassie answered. "She is my mother."

THE END.

DUNC CAGE

DUNC" CAGE. The eyes of many an old-time cowman will brighten when he sees that name. There were few stockmen along the valleys of the South Platte, Smoky and upper Rio Grande, who did not know and love this slight, wiry, humorous, stammering horse lover, big game hunter, famous wing shot, and all-around sportsman.

Graduate of an Eastern University, "black sheep" of a prominent family, who tried in vain to coax him back to the path of sobriety and honor, Dunc made friends with the notorious Bob Ford, borrowed money from "Soapy" Smith, walked across the street and lost it at faro to Soapy's arch-rival, Dave Sponselier.

Dunc was a brilliant writer and could sell anything. He wrote about the wild life of the Rocky Mountains, though less than a dozen men ever know that the stories appearing under the name of D. C. Stewart were written in the Half Circle W bunk house, by Dunc Cage.

The advice of Cage was sought on matters of law. Sons and daughters of wealthy cattlemen bribed Dunc to coach them for their finals, and the newly-rich consulted him on matters of etiquette. Friendly with every one, he was free with his money when he had it, which was not infrequent because his family were constantly attempting to bribe him into coming home. Dunc was a worry to his friends because he had no sense of fear. He would as quickly cuss out the biggest bully on the ranch as he would give a month's wages to a total stranger in need.

Once when a would-be badman planned to run a young Easterner off his homestead, the tenderfoot consulted Cage on the legality of his claim. Dunc's reply was:

"Y-y you're all r-r-right in the s-s-sight of the law, if there was any law, b-b-but there's not; so j-j-just have somebody t-t-tell him that I'm y-y-your friend, that I said I-I-I haven't anything to keep me here or any place else."

That message was enough. Not only was the settler unmolested, but soon after that the bluffer left the valley.

G. C. F.

RODEO RANSOM

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Author of "No Partner Wanted," etc.

BUCKAROO" BARNES, deputy sheriff, Romeo, self-ordained specialist in the genteel art of deduction, public-ordained expert in the garrulous art of trumpeting hot-air, was deep in the arms of Morpheus. He lounged in Sheriff Fish's brand-new swivel chair, his worn boots crossed on top of Fish's thirty-year-old desk, his wide-open mouth, with monotonous regularity, casting simpering wails at the cobwebs on the ceiling.

But Deputy Barnes did not sleep sweetly. He groaned and twisted in his chair. Wild dreams of gory rapine by sinister hombres of the gun and saddle filled his unconscious mind with restlessness. His sweetheart at the Lame Owl Lunch Room, Buttercup by name, was swept away by a villain with black, upcurling mustachios, who held her in some hidden cavern while he, Buckaroo Barnes, was besieged with letters demanding ransom.

He rode forth with Sir Galahad intent, and met the swarthy villain on the lip of a craggy cliff. They fought, blood flew to the treetops, and then they were locked in a death struggle. Nearer, nearer, they caromed to the cliff's edge, with that awful blackness of the gorge licking hungrily at them. Back and forth, like two predatory vipers, they tussled and bustled. Then—down, down, swept poor Buckaroo to certain death. He hit with a thump! His eyes popped open, even in this imaginary death. He looked into

the scowling face of Sheriff Fish, who had just knocked his boots from the desk top.

"You lazy lout!" cried the sheriff. "Get outa that new chair of mine. I paid for that chair outa my own salary. It ain't for the comfort of all the county's cheap help."

"Howdy, Simon," said Buckaroo, grinning his relief that the dream was just a dream, and that, happily, he was alive and kicking. "I just had a horrible dream. Ugh-h!"

"You're always having dreams," snapped Sheriff Fish, "when you should be working. You draw money to assure peace and security for the folks of Jackson County, not yourself."

"You don't understand me, I guess, Simon," drawled the sleepy-eyed deputy. "Time after time I've got inspiration for the solution of crime and evil from my dreams. Look—I just got through dreaming about——"

"Bah!" spat the sheriff angrily. "Dream about that!" He threw a typewritten letter down on the desk.

Buckaroo Barnes read the letter. He chuckled, bringing a stream of words from Fish as timid as the demon-eyed bronc of a puncher's nightmare.

"Funny, is it?" screamed the sheriff. "Listen, you shallow-brained dolt, you, you——"

"Nincompoop," supplied Buckaroo gravely.

"Shut up!" barked Sheriff Fish. "Nincompoop, then! Do you realize what this letter means? Do you realize I got four mouths to feed? You figure to set around and snooze while I do all the work on this case? Think again, you nincompoop. I told you to check the town from hoof to horn. The station, the saloons, the pool rooms, the stables, the rodeo grounds——"

"Oh, that!" echoed Buckaroo lazily. "Why, I done that in fifteen minutes. There ain't any one around answering the description of that robber. He's done flew the basket."

"Hmph!" said the sheriff, then a little milder: "Well, what we gonna do? We can't just set around here like this. The mayor demands that we catch the crook. He says it'll give the town a black eye if we let him get by with it. That's a fine howdy-do! Grand Junction celebrating its fiftieth birthday and the bank is robbed. That's a mell of a huddle—er, a hull of a meddle; thunderation! You know what I mean. It's——"

"A helluva muddle," supplied Buckaroo gravely.

"Yeah! We hire a special rodeo to come here and entertain the folks. We advertise one of the calmest fun spots in the West. And what happens? The bank is robbed in open daylight. Folks'll be afraid to come back here. The chamber of commerce is on our necks. The Women's Purity League, the Prairie Sewing Circle, and even the Grand Junction *Bugle* gave us a dirty dig yesterday."

"That's what the bank gets for staying open and leaving just one man on duty during the rodeo," observed Buckaroo. "Common sense would tell a man that the best time to crack a bank would be during the rodeo. And they had to leave old Jim Toomy, the bookkeeper, on duty. Jim's half blind and couldn't get a good description of the bandit."

"That don't relieve the pressure on us," grumbled Fish petulantly.

"That bandit was smart," further observed the deputy. "He waited until about ten minutes before Kid Blue's fancy riding and trick-roping

act, the high-light of the show. He knew everybody would be at the stadium. And he would only take big bills, fifties and twenties. That's why I believe he stayed here in town. He didn't want a big bundle. I got to dig deep into my immortal brain to find an answer to that one."

"Well!" stormed Sheriff Fish, almost beside himself with rage. "Get off your brains and walk around a while. Get out there to the stadium and look the crowd over. See if you can see any one half way answering Toomy's description."

"A hot description," yawned Buckaroo. "Tall, dark, 'n' handsome. Pfft-t-t! I want to see the show anyhow. Been too busy on this case so far. I'll go. It's early yet. I got to drop by the Lame Owl and grab some grub."

"And don't set there all afternoon talking to Buttercup!" stormed the sheriff.

A FEW minutes later, Deputy Barnes was settling himself on a stool in the Lame Owl Lunch Room. He kept watching the girl behind the counter, and his heart fluttered like sweet-sixteen-and-never-been-kissed.

Buttercup smiled his way once or twice as she juggled food in her dainty hands, dealing it out to this one and that at the counter. Then Buckaroo heard her voice cooing: "Yes, Mr. Blue," as if she were all a-twitter.

Slowly Deputy Barnes turned his head, letting his eyes peer beneath the lowered noses along the counter. What he saw was a slender, dark young puncher in dazzling habiliment. A green neckerchief of sheeny silk surrounded Kid Blue's neck. His beaver Stetson was a delicate blue, and his shirt was a glistening carmine. Long, deep cuffs of black tooled leather slanted back from his thin, tanned hands.

Buckaroo grunted and turned away. He couldn't see the rest of the notorious Kid Blue's ensemble, but could visualize expensive angora chaps, boots that almost shouted their value, and spoon-handled spurs with grinning silver moons along the shanks.

Again came Buttercup's voice:

"Are you sure you have enough pie, Mr. Blue?"

"I'll have a cup of coffee and some coconut-cream pie!" blurted out Deputy Barnes. "If you ain't served all your pie to special customers."

Heads along the counter swung around to grin at the deputy. Buckaroo wished then he had kept his mouth shut. He knew how the gossip in town had magnified his jealousy of Buttercup. The slow heat of anger licked at him.

"Never mind," he grumbled. "I can do without."

Buttercup sidled along the counter and gave Deputy Barnes one of her devastating looks. Buckaroo felt the warm power of that look caress the cockles of his heart. He gulped:

"Well, I been sittin' here ten minutes, ain't I?"

"We're out of coconut-cream pie, Ducky," lisped the golden-headed Buttercup. "We have apple, apple, and apple."

Buckaroo Barnes scowled blackly, his eyes wheeling down the counter to that blue beaver Stetson. The last morsel of a coconut-cream pie was vanishing beneath the hat's rakish brim. Meanwhile, four customers sitting between Deputy Barnes and the blue Stetson arose as one and Buttercup stepped to the cash register to take their money.

Kid Blue wiped his thin lips with a white napkin, dusted off his lap, stood up. The long, curly hair of his chaps swayed as he stood there looking at Deputy Barnes with a slight twinkle of malice in his dark eyes.

"Come back again, Mr. Blue," said Buttercup, her voice pitched with something like awe.

"Kid Blue" turned to Buttercup. Then he stepped close to the counter, reached over, and deliberately pinched Buttercup on her dimpled chin.

"Just charge that meal, toots," said Kid Blue, and Buttercup nodded, gulped, and looked like the canary the snake had charmed.

Then Kid Blue swept outside in all his regal regalia.

Smart-Aleck! fumed Buckaroo to himself. A rodeo dandy! Umph-h! Aloud, he grumbled:

"Gimme some apple pie and coffee."

"Yes, Ducky."

"And don't call me Ducky when there's people around," grumbled Buckaroo. "Sounds silly."

"But, Ducky——"

Buckaroo gulped as he saw gigantic tears well in her eyes. He thought she was going to cry. It appalled him, for he knew how impossible it was to dry Buttercup's tears. Feverishly he sought consoling words, sweet ones, tender ones.

"Gosh, Buttercuppy," he groaned. "I never meant to be mean. Honest! I——"

Buttercup dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"You are mean," she pouted.

"But that jasper, Kid Blue," snapped Buckaroo sternly. "Look at the clothes he wears. Awful!" Then he drew up in scowling indignance as some bitter thought pounded through his mind. He muttered: "And he's got a nerve, too! Reached right across the counter and pinched your chin. I ought to punch his nose."

Buttercup's chin lifted to an angle of remonstrance.

"Don't you dare speak of Mr. Blue like that," she pouted. "I won't listen to such vulgarity. Mr. Blue is champion in his line."

"Blah!" growled Buckaroo over a bite of pie. "Blah! I'm champion in my line, too. Sleuthing. That's me. The slickest deductor of crimes that ever deducted in Grand Junction. I can't be beat."

"Well, why don't you catch the man who robbed the bank? The citizens are afraid of their money. They say there is a thief in our midst. Why, even Mr. Blue left his wallet here for safe keeping."

"He did?" growled Buckaroo.

"Yes."

Buckaroo's eyes thinned away in thought.

"You should get busy on that case instead of grumbling at me," protested Buttercup.

Buckaroo gulped the last of his coffee and leaped from the stool. Throwing a nickel and a dime on the counter, he shouted:

"I am getting on the case. I'll show you who's the champion of champions. Rodeo slicker, is he? Poof! That for a rodeo slicker. He'd be lost if it wasn't for that trained horse of his. Wait'll I catch the hombre who robbed the bank. I'll get five hundred reward for that. I'll show you."

BUCKAROO left the Lame Owl Lunch Room in apparent disgust. He trudged across town to the rodeo grounds, bought a ticket, and was soon seated in the grand stand.

With unenthusiastic eyes, he

scanned the crowd. Hilarity was riding the faces of all. This burned the deputy like heat from the boiling pot of failure. His mind was pondering about a thief. Tall, dark, 'n' handsome. Buckaroo groaned inwardly, recounting the facts as he had them.

This would be the last day of the rodeo. To-morrow, the crowd would be gone, and a vast and deadly silence would, like a storm's aftermath, gnaw at the vitals of Grand Junction. The rodeo special train would leave. And with the crowd would be gone the last chance to catch the crook, if it so happened he was still among them, which fact Deputy Barnes had reason to believe. In the first place, reasoned the deputy, the crook had, to all appearances, gotten by with the stick-up. Why, then, would he take a chance on being spotted by pulling out of town while the celebration was still in progress? If he was smart, he would stick it out, not taking a chance of being suspected by drifting.

The calf-roping contest was in progress, so Buckaroo turned his attention to the rope that sailed out, snared its caroming victim, and thumped it against the ground. Buckaroo missed the hog-tie, for his mind had again drifted back to the bank robbery.

Here was a case that was taking the full resources of his sensitive deductive powers. He fitted himself into the rôle of the robber. He went through the entire theft in his vivid imagination. His five-foot-two stature reached upward ten or so inches. His sandy hair took on a sinister blackness. His wind-raw face became a dark, olive hue. He was tall, dark, 'n' handsome. His lips parted in a dreamy grin. He imagined himself, thus arrayed in Adonislike features, striding through fields of yellow-headed beauties. He could see their demureness strike out at him, he could feel—— He jumped, emitting a startled grunt. He could feel the blunt end of some one's elbow jab his ribs.

"See that! See that!" cried Buckaroo's neighbor. "He lit smack-dab on his face."

Deputy Barnes scowled and pinned his eyes on some puncher down there reeling up from the dust, and a wide-eyed bronc sunfishing away in a glory of dust.

Event followed event, and presently the announcer rode forth and held up his hands. Silence fell like a blanket over the spectators. The announcer placed a battered megaphone against his lips.

"La-a-dee-es and gentl-muns!" he thundered. "The next ee-vent of the day-y—Kid Blue! The most gaw-aw-jiss galaxy of gra-and galloping and trick-ee twisting of the lar-riat-t ev-ahh witnessed in Gr-r-a-and Junc-shun. Kid Blue, with a new bag of tantalizing, terrrific, tempes-s-tuous, tonsil-splitting tr-r-icks! He rides in, lad-ees and gentl-muns, and does devastating tricks while he dr-r-ess-es!"

A murmuring titter swept the grand stand.

"Ump-ph!" said Deputy Barnes to himself. "Ump-ph!" he settled back against some one's knees, waiting this spectacle.

A minute passed, and another. The crowd grew restless, craning their necks for the appearance of this master in the awesome art of slithering like a reptile around a horse in full stride. The announcer kept waving the crowd to silence, assuring them by the nod of his head that it wouldn't be long, now.

Then came the dim thrum of hoofs. Louder they grew, pounding

like fury, until at last something flashed over the low fence at the south end of the rodeo grounds. Kid Blue, upright in his stirrups, was waving an armful of flashy clothes at the crowd.

Deputy Barnes leaned forward, thinning his eyes. As Kid Blue galloped past the grand stand, Buckaroo saw that he was arrayed in regular puncher's habiliment.

Back and forth sashayed the nimble-footed palomino of Kid Blue's. It bowed, it pranced, it galloped swiftly, it turned on a dime and gave the gaping spectators a nickel change. And all this while, standing in the saddle, lying flat across the rump of his palomino, hanging by the animal's proud neck, Kid Blue was wiggling into his clothes. Then, as he pranced by fully clothed, the spectators rose in a roaring salute.

Kid Blue then tossed reservation to the winds. An even dozen horses, thundering past the dashing performer, fell victim to his rope. He drew gasps of fright and admiration from the grand stand as he feigned losing his balance above those flashing hoofs. He did this, and that, but not for the benefit of Deputy Barnes. For this scowling minion of the law had risen in obvious disgust, and was elbowing his way out of the grand stand.

He trudged from the rodeo grounds slowly, striking across town. Presently he was again seated in the Lame Owl Lunch Room. "Bowlegs" McCarthy, cook and dishwasher, was behind the counter.

"Where's Buttercup?" grumbled Buckaroo.

"She's at the rodeo," said McCarthy. "I told her I'd watch the joint. She's crazy to see Kid Blue perform his miracles of saddle and rope."

"Gimme a cup of coffee."

A cup of coffee slid across the counter, and Buckaroo began to sip at it tastelessly. His eyes hung on something there on the back counter. It was a fat leather wallet.

"Buttercup said for me to guard that with my life," said Bowlegs McCarthy, following Buckaroo's smoldering gaze.

"Yeah," snarled the deputy. "He's tryin' to give our town a black eye by claiming it ain't safe to carry money around. I ought to punch his nose just for that—if nothing else."

Deputy Barnes gave a stifled yawn, as if excitement had raised a nerve-tingling impulse in him. Then suddenly he gulped the rest of his coffee, threw down a nickel, and left.

From that moment there was little seen of Deputy Barnes the balance of that day. Dusk crowded in from the east. All Grand Junction was a-bustle. The rodeo special was puffing on a siding, waiting for the limited to get ahead of it.

Cal Beacon, the station master, admitted seeing Deputy Barnes shortly following the rodeo. He told Sheriff Fish he had talked with the deputy, but had little to say regarding the gist of the conversation.

Sheriff Fish began a systematic search of Grand Junction, not knowing whether to be just mildly exasperated, or definitely furious. Max Jubal, who ran Grand Junction's lone real estate office, admitted he, too, had talked to Buckaroo. But was reluctant to reveal what had been said.

IT was about an hour before the limited was due. The black fog of night had settled peacefully over Grand Junction. And suddenly a large hole was rent in this peaceful black. On the north edge of

town a sudden conflagration threw its ugly red tongues of destruction leaping upward.

Fresh from the rodeo, every one gladly accepted this new development in excitement. The entire town sped toward the fire, an old frame shack long deserted and for sale.

Even the rodeo performers hurried out to the blaze. And some of these joined the long bucket brigade that soon disbanded to join the circle of onlookers. Thirty minutes later, the fire reduced to a heap of smoky, red ashes, everybody trudged back to town. And then another discovery was made.

Kid Blue climbed aboard the car in which his valuable palomino was bedded down. He was inside for about a minute, then came out yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Thief! My horse has been stole!" cried Kid Blue. "The law! Where is the law?"

Sheriff Fish came bouncing to the forefront, truculent, tensed, ready to do fierce battle to save the peace and harmony of Grand Junction.

"Hold your horses!" yelled Fish above the sudden tumult.

"That's what he forgot to do!" some one sang out.

"Shut up!" stormed the sheriff. "What's a matter, Mr. Blue?"

"My horse has been stole," wailed Kid Blue in an aggrieved tone. "He's worth a fortune. He was here when I left for the fire. When I came back he was gone from the car."

Sheriff Fish hurried inside the car. He examined with infinite care every inch of the stall from which the fortune in horseflesh had vanished. He tried to find some vague clew, but the straw-covered floor held none. The horse was gone, and that was all.

"The dirty vandals," muttered Fish dejectedly, remembering that scathing letter he had so recently received from the mayor. And he could visualize, too, the dig he would get in to-morrow's *Bugle*.

Calling for lanterns, Sheriff Fish ordered everybody back away from the car. Lanterns were brought, throwing their injured rays of light gloomily about. For half an hour the ground around the car was studied. But the tracks that were once there had been erased by the feet of the crowd.

The limited roared past during the heat of investigation. Kid Blue's cries lifted higher and higher above the tumult. He swore he would spread the news of Grand Junction's crime wave from Canada to the Rio Grande, from California to Missouri. In less than half an hour he had Sheriff Fish so jittery he would have jumped at the yowl of a kitten.

The engineer of the rodeo special yanked his whistle rope, sending an ethereal wail of impatience through the town. The conductor advised Kid Blue they would have to pull out, because they were due next night in Nacoma.

"I got to stay here," groaned Kid Blue angrily. "I can't perform without my horse. Go ahead. I'll ship out and catch up with you somewhere down the line."

The special creaked out of town. Excitement kept its stormy way in every one's mind. No one thought of going home. Mystery, intrigue, even danger, seemed to whine around each corner of Grand Junction, which seemed to have fallen into the gory jaws of a crime wave.

It was about ten o'clock that evening that Kid Blue had the first word about his horse. He was sitting in the sheriff's office, lament-

ing, threatening and cajoling the flabbergasted lawman. The mayor had just visited Fish, and threatened to swing enough votes in the next county election to put Fish where he belonged, salted away in a mackeral barrel.

Some one knocked on the door, and Sheriff Fish, with dire misgivings, yelled, "Come in." He almost knew it would be a committee of one or two from the Women's Purity League, the Prairie Sewing Circle, or maybe the chamber of commerce. He was surprised when an old man, unmistakably a man of the desert, shuffled through the doorway.

"What do you want?" snapped Fish irritably. "We can't let you sleep here. You'll have to go to a hotel. Right down the street. Good-by."

The old man shook his head, holding up an envelope.

"Lookin' fer a hombre name o' Blue," he croaked. "Done got a message fer him."

Kid Blue made a wild dive for the letter. He snatched it from the old man's hand and tore it open. As his eyes scanned the letter, he yelped as if he had been gored.

"What's wrong?" demanded Fish, peering over Kid Blue's shoulder.

"Look!" screamed the excited rodeo performer. "It's ransom. My horse has been kidnaped. That abductor is demanding two hundred dollars ransom."

"Holy ham hocks!" roared Sheriff Fish. "Kidnaping! Oh, what has this country come to?"

"That's all right," said Kid Blue. "I'll pay him. Look! It says to meet him at Buckhorn Point at midnight. Where is that?"

"Two miles east," said Fish excitedly. "Hm-m-m! Looks like we'll just end this crime wave here and now."

"Wait a minute!" objected Kid Blue. "I can't take any chances on losing my horse. It would ruin my act. He says to come there alone. If I bring the law he'll kill my horse."

"Never mind," said Fish grimly. "That'll be the last threat that hombre'll make in a good many year'. Wouldn't wonder if he ain't the same jasper that robbed the bank."

"I'll bet he is!" cried Kid Blue. He turned from the lawman, intent upon asking the old man what the sender of the letter looked like. But the man had made an unobserved exit from the room.

"You just leave everything up to me," said Fish sternly. "Go get a horse at the livery and ride out to Buckhorn Point. Take your two hundred dollars with you. Mebbe you better leave the rest of your money here for safe keeping. Take two hundred from your wallet and go on out. Leave your wallet here in my safe. This might be a stick-up, too."

"No," objected Kid Blue. "It don't sound like a stick-up to me. I'll not bother you with the responsibility of keeping my wallet."

Sheriff Fish did not press the point. He was harassed with enough problems as it was. Bank robbery, kidnaping of a horse, the Women's Purity League, the mayor, the chamber of commerce. Cold sweat broke out over his face as he realized the heckling he was in for if he didn't break the threat of crime.

"You ride on out," said Fish presently. "I'll have men planted around points of vantage. As soon as you pay the ransom and get your horse, we'll open up and blow that crook to Jerusalem."

Kid Blue swallowed dryly. "Yeah. Yeah, that's the stuff."

Sheriff Fish gave Kid Blue defi-

nite instructions for reaching Buckhorn Point, then stormed from his office in search of a posse.

IT was thirty minutes before midnight when Sheriff Fish had planted his last man around Buckhorn Point. He himself took a strategic position up-slope from the point, drawing back into the thorny brush with a deep scowl on his face. The scowl melted somewhat as he realized what a bright moon there was, and how this would aid when it came the moment to fill the horse kidnaper with hot lead.

Then he began to think about his incorrigible deputy, and for thirty minutes heaped silent abuses on Buckaroo Barnes. He made threats that, if ever consummated, would have condemned him to a dark and dismal cell for life. Then all this left his mind. For he saw a rider trot into view on the escarpment below.

That would be Kid Blue, thought the lawman patiently. But his nerves began to tingle, and he was fighting at the bit. Then another rider emerged from the deep shadow down there, and this one was leading an unsaddled horse that gleamed almost white against the thin dusk.

Sheriff Fish lifted his spurs a trifle, holding them in readiness an inch from his mount's flanks. He lifted a gun from his holster, and laid its heavy snout across the fork of his saddle.

Covertly he watched as the second horseman pulled close to the first arrival. It was a tense moment for Sheriff Fish. They were talking about something down there. Impatience jabbed its sharp needles against Fish. He swore silently as the discussion waxed longer between Kid Blue and the kidnaper. Then he saw Kid Blue reach into his pocket, draw out something, and hand it to the kidnaper. A match flared. He's counting the money, thought Fish. Then a pitched yell burst from the sheriff's lips.

The kidnaper had grabbed Kid Blue. There was a short struggle in their saddles, then both men toppled to the ground.

Fish jabbed in his spurs, yelling with the gusto of a pack of Sioux after Bill Cody's scalp. Other figures shot from dark shadows, and presently a dozen posse men were coming from all directions bearing down upon the two combatants on Buckhorn Point.

Kid Blue seemed to be fighting for his life. Time and again he broke loose and tried to race for his horse, only to be brought to the ground by his assailant. They struggled for an instant on the lip of the point. Then rolled back, falling to the ground, arms and legs flailing. At that moment the entire posse leaped upon them and jerked them apart.

"Stand fast!" yelled Sheriff Fish, jabbing a gun in the mid-section of the extortionist. Then the sheriff's jaw fell away, and it looked as if his legs were crumbling beneath him. "What——" he faltered. Then: "Buckaroo Barnes! What's the meaning of this? Stand back, gents! We got a deputy here that's gone berserk. He's turned crooked."

"Don't let that hombre go!" shouted Deputy Barnes. "He's the bank robber."

A hush fell upon the posse men. The sheriff wiped his hand across his eyes.

"Holy ham hocks!" gasped Fish. "Are you telling the truth, Buckaroo?"

"Nothing else!" snapped Deputy Barnes. "I got the evidence."

Sheriff Fish felt as if he were

smothered. He tugged at his collar, and his startled gaze flashed round to Kid Blue.

The rodeo performer was struggling in the arms of two posse men.

"It's a lie!" yelled Kid Blue throatily. "He's the crook. He stole——"

"Wait a minute," gasped Fish weakly. "Now, everybody keep their trap shut while Buckaroo talks. Say something, Buckaroo."

Deputy Barnes's voice again broke into the numbed brains of the posse men and Sheriff Fish.

"It's just like this," said Barnes affably. "I figured Kid Blue was the crook. I bought that old house from Max Jubal for fifty dollars and set it on fire. While every one was watching it burn, I stole his horse. Then I sent him a ransom note and the rest was easy."

"Easy!" echoed Sheriff Fish.

"Sure," said Buckaroo. "You see, the first suspicion I got was when Kid Blue left his wallet with Buttercup. I couldn't figure that out, and anything I can't figure out is meat for sausage. I didn't want to look in the wallet, because Kid Blue might find it out. He'd have suit against the county then. Going into his personal effects without a warrant. And I didn't want to get a warrant, for he might get rid of the evidence. So I just acted on my own judgment. I asked myself how I'd pull a stick-up like that if I was Kid Blue. When I saw his performance, it all came to me. You see, he held up the bank in his old clothes. Then he rode like the devil for the rodeo grounds and changed as he performed. He did this every day, so there wouldn't be any cause to suspect anything. Pretty slick, huh? All the description the bookkeeper at the bank could give us was that he was tall, dark, 'n' handsome."

Sheriff Fish held up a hand. There was a confounded expression on his face.

"My foot!" he snapped. "What's all this tomfoolery about kidnaping his horse."

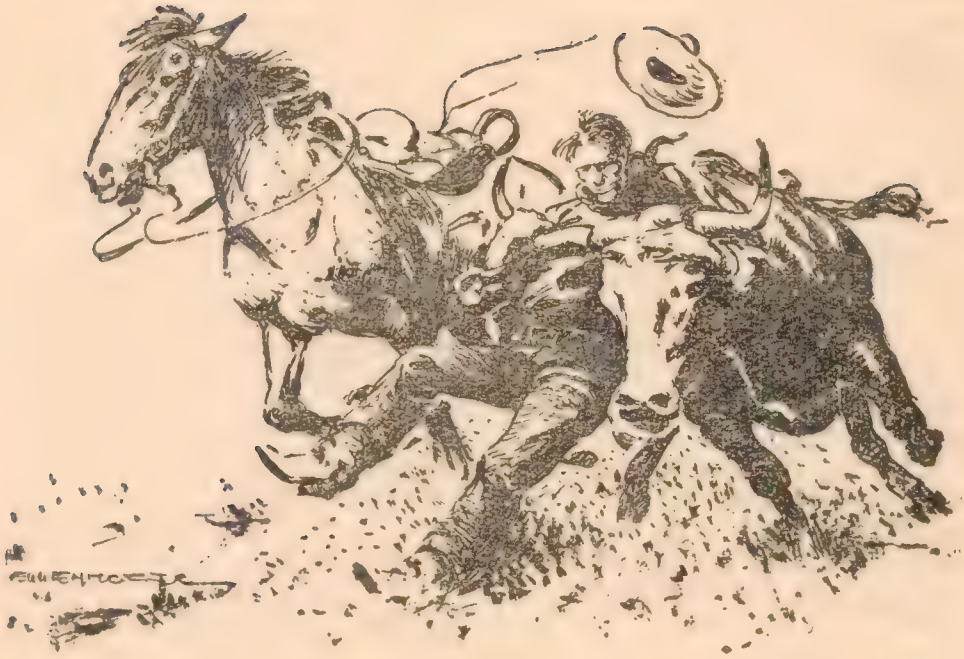
"Oh, that?" Deputy Barnes smiled. "Why, if you remember, the stick-up man demanded big bills. He got fifties and twenties. He wanted it that way so he could conceal the loot easily in his wallet. Then he gave the wallet to Buttercup so there wouldn't be any chance of any one finding the money on him. I just made him pay off the ransom in big bills. Told him I wanted a two-hundred-dollar bill. He finally argued me down to four fifties. I had the numbers on these bills from the bank, and as soon as I got them from him, I struck a match and checked the numbers. Simple, huh?" Deputy Barnes stifled a yawn. "Well, I got to get back to town and wash up. He's a better fighter than I gave him credit for. I'm kinda glad you came out figuring to capture the kidnaper. He might have licked me."

Sheriff Fish gulped as he thought of how near he had come to killing his pet deputy.

The party struck out for town, the crestfallen Kid Blue in their midst. Sheriff Fish couldn't get something off his mind. Finally he said to Buckaroo:

"How in tarnation you got such a goofy idea to kidnap his horse is beyond me."

"Well," Buckaroo admitted. "I got to dreaming about ransom is all. It just came to me. I had another dream, too, while I was sleeping out there in the brush a while ago. I almost slept overtime, too. I dreamt I proposed to Buttercup. Well, see you fellows later. I'm riding on ahead."



What Is A Cowboy?

By JAY LUCAS

I HAVE been days figuring out long definitions, but at last the thing came to me in one simple sentence: A cowboy is a man who can hold a cow-punching job all the year round on a big, open range outfit.

That leaves a heap of big-hatted fellows out. It even disqualifies a lot of well-known contest hands; I've seen them fired before they had time to learn the horse pasture. It leaves out the fellow you find running around town in high-heeled boots and big Stetson and chaps—a man who wears chaps except for range work is always a fake, pure and simple; the real cowboy doesn't have to go around "playing cowboy," and he certainly won't burden himself with the weight of chaps when he is afoot. And it leaves out the fellow who has (or whose dad has), a few head of gentle cattle running around his homestead, and who likes to dress up in chaps and drive them around. Some of those fellows have convinced even themselves that they are cowboys.

I have met Eastern "wise guys" who can tell you definitely that there are no more cowboys, and maybe never were any. I would surely like to get one of those smart fellows out on some of the tougher outfits right now—it would be great to see the fun! There are outfits today that work exactly as outfits

worked fifty or sixty years ago. The cattle are wilder than jack rabbits; the horses are twenty times wilder than the cattle; and the local cowboys are just a shade too wild for either horses or cattle.

Do they carry guns? Not long ago the editor of a certain magazine (no, not this one), bawled me out for writing a strictly modern cowboy story in which all the cowboys carried guns. He said that everybody knew cowboys hadn't carried guns openly for at least twenty-five years. I was flabbergasted. I and all my pals were carrying them daily, right out in sight, and I'd as soon have gone out in the Arizona sun without my hat as without my gun. The editor meant well, but he didn't know a thing about the West—at least, not away from civilized tourist routes.

I've often read about cowboys in other parts loading their horses on trailers to go where they wanted to ride. All I can say is that I never saw it done—I've always worked the old way. I might add that although I've spent twenty-five years on the range, hardly ever off it once, I have never run onto a dude ranch. I know there are lots of them in other sections, but it's all cow ranches here.

Perhaps the simplest way to tell the real cowboy from the imitation is by the corners of his eyes. The real one has those sun-wrinkles all "squinched" up so deep they'll never come out. A good coat of tan means nothing—anybody can get one in a few days, and the best cowboy will bleach out fast, too. A man with smooth corners to his eyes is not a cowboy, and never was. Of course, other men who are in the strong sun get those wrinkles, too, so let's try something to check by: Small feet. A huge majority of cowboys nowadays were reared at the work, and never walked much. Therefore the small feet. For the real, dyed-in-the wool, yard-wide cowboy, there is one unfailing mark—white, delicate, somewhat weak hands. The cowboys pride and joy (besides small feet), were those white hands. I've seen a crowd of us shivering ourselves warm because none of us could find his gloves, and so did not want to stop outside the door for an armful of wood, and so ruin his hands. If we didn't keep our hands white, how the blazes could anybody tell us from common working men? Certainly not by our brown, wrinkled faces. So—delicate, white hands and sun-wrinkles mean cowboy every time.

If a cowboy claims to be actually working at the job now, glance at his waist and hips. A fat cowboy never existed outside a book, because a cowboy has to be in the perfect training of Dempsey ready for a title bout. And if a large, splendidly built young fellow claims to be a cowboy, chances are he's a liar. A heavy man, even if he's all muscle, doesn't seem to be able to stand those long hours in the saddle; it's a job for wiry men. Indeed, the cavalry has found out the same thing. Back before the World War there was talk of a war between this country and Mexico, and I tried to enlist, in the cavalry, of course. They didn't want to take me, because I was over six feet, even though I was trained down to a sort of beanpole. But they finally said they would.

There are two schools of cowboys. Well, the Californian, or "center," wear Levi's with those wide cuffs outside his boot legs, and he wears "shotgun" chaps with fringe, instead of the "rimmy's" traditional batwings, and he "dallies" or takes

winds instead of tying his rope solidly to his single-cinch saddle. And the California center uses a bit that looks like a modified bear trap pushed into his horse's mouth—the rimmy uses a very light curb, and somehow manages to get his horse stopped just as well. The two schools have very different ways of handling cattle and horses, so a man of one school may have difficulty holding a job on an outfit of the other school. Incidentally, the movies are all made in California, so the movie-goer sees mostly the center cowboy and thinks that's the main thing. As a matter of fact, the rimmy with his boots outside his pants, and his wing chaps, held all the cattle country but a strip near the west coast. To show a Texas cowboy with his trousers outside his boots, or with narrow chaps, is as accurate as showing him punching cattle in a tall silk hat—and would get him laughed at to about the same extent.

And I never did see a real cowboy wear double-breasted shirts, or fancy pants, or a neckerchief other than plain black silk (except for contests, when the town men offered a prize for the gaudiest dress). But the plain cow-puncher, with his shabby old brown batwings, and his neutral-colored dress, and his high-heeled boots, which were absolutely necessary, is about ninety-'leven times as picturesque as the pretty-boy with all his doo-dangles and fancy stuff. Besides, I hold that this real puncher is the finest man, and the most perfect gentleman, this old world ever saw. And I'm ready to lick anybody who says one word against him. His numbers are getting small, I must admit, but he's still here, reckless and happy-go-lucky as ever—and long may he ride the range, say I!

Coming Next Week

"HEIRS TO THE RANCH," by GUTHRIE BROWN

OLD METHODS STILL WORK

ONE used to hear people say, "My father's religion (or politics, or whatever the subject under discussion,) is good enough for me." We hear less of that in these days when almost everybody is striking out for himself in a more or less original manner. Yet there is one notable example, that of an Oklahoma farmer who tills his 240 acres with an ordinary cultivator and a chisel. The chisel is a drought-born plowshare, originally made with a truck spring which brings clods of earth to the surface from a depth of one foot to eighteen inches.

From a planting of 170 acres, this farmer from the Panhandle section harvested 600 bushels of feed from a 30-acre plot and 700 bushels from the remaining 140 acres.

DEAR MEAT

By

CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Saddle Savvy," etc.

WHEN Dalt Brownell, cow-puncher at large, homesteaded at Cow Springs, he needed a team of horses with which to haul cabin logs, corral poles and fence posts. Not having the money to buy a pair of horses, he saddled his roan and jogged eight miles to the upper end of the valley where he borrowed a team of gray horses from Tim Lounsberry, a tired, weathered little man who had a run-down ranch, a large family and much poverty.

"Keep 'em as long as you need 'em," Tim said. "Take my wagon, too, if you need it."

"Team and harness is all I need," answered Dalt, a slim puncher of medium build. "The feller I bought the relinquishment from left some runnin' gears there. Well, much obliged, Tim. I'll make it right with you."

Harness jingled loosely on the grays as Dalt led them back down the valley. Hoofs left deep imprints in the soil which, last night, had been soaked by a June rain. The rider was crossing a low ridge about three miles north of Sanpoint, the valley town, when he came upon a team and wagon stopped on the road which cut into the valley from the near-by mountain.

The driver, Clive Markle, who owned the livery stable in Sanpoint, waited for Dalt to approach.

"Kinda heavy goin' with that load of grain, ain't it?" Dalt called.

"Yeah," replied the dark man on the driver's seat. "My team's all in."

Dalt looked at the sweating, gaunt blacks and nodded.

"Still three miles to go," Markle said, looking disconsolately into the pale gold of the setting sun. "And I sure hate to punish this team that much longer."

"Well, I guess I could hitch this team of Tim Lounsberry's up, and pull your load into town, Markle."

Markle brightened. "If you will. I'll pay you for it."

"The money'll go to Tim," Dalt told him. "He can sure use every dollar he can get."

Tugs were undone. Soon the grays were hitched to the loaded wagon. And Clive Markle, hopping on one of his blacks, was cutting across the hills, taking a direct route to town, one much shorter than that followed by the road.

That first mile was hard going, and Dalt let the old grays take their time; stopped often to breathe them on long hills. Dusk had deepened into darkness, alleviated only by the stars, by the time the wagon started rolling along the hard-packed, winding flange road clefted out of the bluff which banked the deep and swirling flood waters of the Travois River.

Dalt drove carefully along this uneasy course, wary against letting the right wheels of the wagon get too close to the edge. He was about to put the most dangerous piece of the road behind him, and was braking down a steep curve when things happened.

Dalt couldn't see clearly, but it seemed as if a cedar tree, growing close to the upper edge of the road, brushed against the gray on the near side. There followed a loud snort, a tug on the lines—and the awful sensation of those right wheels dropping over the edge of the narrow road. It all happened so quickly, Dalt was a little dazed. But, cat-quick, he did the only thing he could do.

Feeling the rock of the wagon, he jumped blindly uphill, landed on his hands and knees in the hard road—and listened to the plunge of team and loaded wagon into the swirling, silt-laden river some fifty feet below.

There was the squeal of a horse, a deep splash, and a nauseous sensation rushing over Dalt. Stiffly he came to his feet, and saw that his roan saddle horse, tied by the bridle reins to the end-gate rod of the wagon, had broken loose. The roan was still trumpeting faint snorts of excitement.

"Easy, Blue," Dalt said, and laid a gentle hand on the arched neck. "It's a good thing you rared back hard, old boy, or you'd been drug over the edge—— Gosh! Old Tim's team—and Markle's wagon—buried under ten feet of high water!"

Utterly miserable, and with the echo of a sickening splash still roaring in his ears, Dalt rode his roan along the remaining mile to town. He rode slowly, as if dreading to break the news to Clive Markle. And wondered how he could ever raise enough money to pay old Tim for the loss of the gray team.

"I wish I'd never borrowed 'em!" he groaned. "And I wish I'd never hitched 'em to that wagon of—— But what's the use of regrettin' now? It—it's happened!"

DALT finally rode into the Sanpoint Livery Barn where Clive Markle was just finishing up the transaction of a business deal, a deal which involved the sale of some horses to a buyer.

"Six hundred and fifty—sixty—seventy——"

But Markle wasn't paying any attention now to the currency being counted into his hand by the horse buyer. He had seen Dalt. He whirled quickly and asked:

"Where's the wagon? Don't tell me a fresh team couldn't make it that last three miles with——"

"They're—sunk!" Dalt announced. And then he poured out the whole story of tragedy.

As he talked, Markle's dark face grew darker. At last the stable keeper growled, "Can't even drive a team of horses! Well, that's your hard luck, Brownell! You're goin' to pay me for that wagon and load of oats! Danged if I'm goin' to take the loss!"

"Hold on now, Markle," Dalt told him. "It was an accident. It might've happened to you just the same way, if you'd been——"

"Hell!" snorted the other. "I've drove that road a thousand time. Yeah, with four-horse teams. You agreed to fetch that load to town, but you wrecked it, lost it forever! Well, I'm startin' to collect part of my dues right now!"

He grabbed the bit of the roan horse. Dalt resented this hard gesture. He leaped down from his saddle—and took a blow to the side of his head, one delivered by Markle's right fist.

Dalt, jarred off balance, tried to brace himself. But the ground was muddy and he slipped down. Markle was quick to take advantage of his opponent's misfortune. He leaped, gripped Dalt around the neck with his left arm, and started to pummel him with his free fist.

"Easy there, Clive!" cautioned Pierce, the horse buyer. "Don't beat a man when he's down. Here!" And big Pierce pulled Dalt's attacker off, stood between the two men who were breathlessly glaring at each other.

"He ain't grabbin' my horse!" said Dalt, rubbing his bruised face.

"Leave him here till mornin'," suggested Pierce. "Then go talk to a lawyer, both of you, and see where you stand. You won't settle no legal question with fists."

Reluctantly, and feeling that perhaps Markle did have a claim on the roan horse, Dalt withdrew. Bitterly he ambled up the deserted main street and wondered what to do. At last he walked to Sheriff Langfield's office, seeking counsel, but the officer was nowhere to be found.

Still wondering how he could pay Tim Lounsberry for the lost team of grays, and still hotly resenting those unfair blows he had taken from Clive Markle's fists, Dalt waited until most of the lights in town were out, and then made his way back to the livery stable.

The front doors were closed. The puncher, climbing over a corral fence, made his way to the back of the barn and peered through a crack. Markle was still in his barn, sitting on a box beside a lighted lantern, and doing some figuring.

The minutes ticked by. Still Dalt remained there at the rear of the barn, peering through the crack. Finally he saw Markle pull a packet of currency from his pocket, place it in a cigar box; and, carrying both cigar box and lantern, climb the ladder leading to the big hayloft above.

Dalt's pulse gained tempo as his gaze focused on that cigar box under Markle's arm. The luckless puncher had come back here to get his roan horse and ride out to his homestead. But now the sight of that money and the stinging memory of Markle's jolting fists—too, Tim Lounsberry mustn't stand to lose.

Markle was moving around up in the hayloft. At last he came down the ladder again, put out the lantern and left the barn. Dalt waited another two hours, until he knew that Markle had joined a poker game up at the saloon, a game which usually lasted most of the night.

Then Dalt Brownell sneaked into the barn, climbed up into the loft. The place was pretty well filled with timothy hay. The puncher began scouting around, climbed up on the hay until he could clutch the rafter braces, and was glad that the roof boards were so warped that they admitted cracks of light from a late-risen moon.

Waist-deep in hay, Dalt made his way to the rear of the spacious loft. Suddenly he slipped and slid against the heavy plank top of a long chest built into a rear corner of the loft, a corner completely hidden by hay. The top plank felt damp and cold to Dalt's touch.

"What's he got back in here?" the puncher asked himself.

He risked lighting a match, and raised the lid of the chest. Then he knew that he had discovered a shrewdly-hidden meat refrigerator. On a shelf near the top of this ice-cooled container, Dalt also found the cigar box he sought. A bit nervously he grabbed a thick packet of currency and shoved it into the front of his shirt.

There was more, but he wasn't too greedy. All he wanted was to make sure he had enough to pay old Tim for the drowned team. Then, looking hard at several quarters of fresh meat amply cooled in this big, home-made ice box, he slowly made his way toward the ladder again. But he soon retraced his steps and lifted a quarter of the meat. This he lugged with him when he headed for the ladder.

DOWNSTAIRS once more, Dalt cautiously saddled his roan horse in the dark, and eased out the back door with him—still lugging that quarter of meat. The corral gate creaked all too loudly. And Dalt, looking up the moonlit street, saw Clive Markle emerging from the saloon.

"Hey, you!" yelled Markle wildly. "You take that horse outta my barn and I'll——"

He came running as fast as he could. But Dalt was in the saddle and racing out of town.

"Good thing Markle wasn't packin' a gun!" he said as he thundered out along the road leading up the valley.

But when he was a half mile from town, he looked back and saw that another rider, mounted on a pinto horse, was leaving Sanpoint, and heading fast in this direction. This fact prompted Dalt to keep moving along at a fast clip.

Still on a lope, he crossed the flat above town and clattered up that moonlit, winding flange of road curving ribbonlike above the June-flood waters of the Travois River. He didn't stop until he reached the spot where he had brushed closely with death earlier in the night. Here he dismounted, and began to examine the cedar tree which grew close to the road.

Then he knew for the first time what had happened. A piece of cut rope, one end of it still tied around the jagged point of a huge boulder was——

Hoofs were drumming along the road. Dalt left his roan standing there, and ducked around behind the cedar tree—and behind the big boulder. Crouching here, he heard Clive Markle halt, swing from his saddle.

"Come out, wherever you are,

Brownell!" called the stable keeper. "I've got a gun this time! And for two cents——"

He was moving as he talked. Dalt waited tensely until he saw the muzzle of a .45 easing around the boulder. Then he went into action. He swung out with his right boot and kicked the weapon from Markle's hand. It was a hard kick. The gun spun through the air, and Markle started after it.

But Dalt bounded out to block the other man's path.

"I don't need a gun!" Markle growled. "I licked you once to-night. But this time there's nobody to save you from what you're goin' to get. I'll pound you till——"

He lunged wrathfully, his fist cutting the air past Dalt's face. Dalt didn't slip on a piece of mud this time, however. Very careful to keep his footing, he sank a short, vicious left into Markle's stomach. The stable keeper grunted, and missed with another long-swung right.

Dalt belted him in the mid-section again, and this time crossed with a jarring right which peeled the hide from his opponent's cheek bone. Markle sputtered, rushed into the fray again, and more wildly.

Dalt took advantage of this wildness. He was cool in his rage, catquick and savage. He could keep away from Markle's blows, but the stable owner wasn't fast enough to keep away from those coming at him. His lips were split, his thick brows trickling, his breath coming in broken gasps.

Then Dalt found his antagonist's jaw with a lashing right, and Markle tumbled.

"Get up and take some more!" Dalt rasped. "You've got it comin!" He grabbed the other by the collar, tried to jerk him to his feet. But Markle's fight was gone.

Rather dazed the latter mumbled through swelling lips, "You can take your roan, Brownell!"

"You're dang right I can!" Dalt gritted. "And with a clear conscience. And I can take this money I found in a cigar box of yours!"

"You thief!" Markle grunted. "There's five hundred dollars in that wad there! So you sneaked around and found my——" He hesitated.

"Your hidden ice box—yeah!" Dalt replied. "The one where you keep that venison you've been bootleggin' around town! Oh, I've heard rumors about your deer-meat game, Markle. Maybe you heard rumors, too. Maybe that's why you wrecked a team and wagon to-night—and come within one of drowndin' me. You got scared!"

"You're crazy!" Markle countered. "There wasn't nothin' but some sacks of oats on that wagon!"

"What about this?" Dalt turned and grabbed up the quarter of venison he had carried from town.

Markle gaped. "How'd you get that off the wagon 'fore it——"

"I've got it, haven't I?" Dalt snapped.

The stable owner no longer tried bluffing. He didn't know this particular piece of meat had come from town, and Dalt didn't tell him.

"All right," Markle finally agreed. "You keep the five hundred dollars, Brownell. Pay Tim Lounsberry a hundred of it for his team."

"Two hundred," Dalt corrected. "He needs the money."

"You—you won't spill this to Sheriff Langfield, will you?" Markle was pleading now. "You've made three hundred on the deal."

"What happened?" Dalt demanded. "Did you get suspicious when you got to town this evenin'? Did you think the sheriff was on to

your 'grain haulin' business? Was that why you hurried back here and tied that cedar tree back with a piece of rope? Then cut the rope and let the tree spring against my team when——"

"Had a tip the sheriff was watchin'," Markle grumbled. "I—I had to do somethin'!"

"So you wrecked a team, and risked my neck to——"

A shadow moved behind Dalt. He whirled quickly and saw fat, drowsy old Sheriff Langfield, gun in hand, advancing. Markle saw the officer, too. He yelled, struggled to his feet. But Langfield said:

"Keep your shirt on, you meat-peddlin' buzzard! I've been waitin' all afternoon and night for a load of 'grain' to come into Sanpoint. But just now, after hearin' you two talk, I've found out what become of it. I don't blame Brownell for givin' you one of the worst beatin's I ever saw, Markle."

"I—I tried to find you in town, sheriff," Dalt faltered. "You see, I took some of Markle's money and then——"

"Keep it!" Langfield interrupted. "I heard him agree that you could. All I want is this quarter of meat, and a chance to get the goods on Markle. I've been waitin' for this a long time."

"Then I'm—in the clear on the deal?" Dalt asked.

Langfield nodded. "Which is better'n bein' down there in the river—where Markle nearly put you!"

"A lot better," Dalt agreed, smiling. "But kinda dear meat for Markle."

DROUGHT A FARM HAZARD

DROUGHTS," says Dr. Paul B. Sears, soil conservation authority, of Oklahoma, "are just the same thing to the farmer as traffic accidents are to an insurance company. And the farmer should make allowances for them just as the insurance company does.

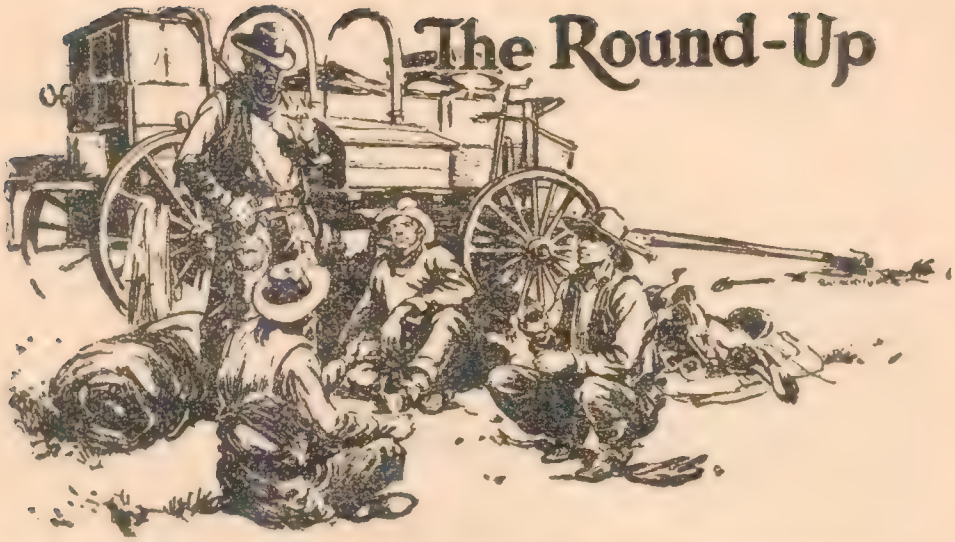
"There should always be strip planting to follow the land contours. Where that's done, it has resulted in increased yields and doubled penetration of soil moisture. That kind of planting ribs the planted ground grass, holding the rainfall and allowing it to sink in. Where strip planting was used, tests show moisture was strong, in some instances, to a depth of thirty to forty inches.

"Farmers should test their soil yearly to determine if they should plant a crop. A seed grows on the moisture in the ground at the time of planting. We are able to tell almost certainly when crops should be planted and when they should not by this method. We must get the soil anchored down. A great increase in the amount of grass land is needed.

"You just can't count on rain. Farmers will have to get away from the 'plunger psychology' of plunging the seed into the ground year after year, and hoping for a crop."

During dry years, weeds may be allowed to grow where the wheat usually has been planted. On the high plains, crops must depend entirely on rain because the underground water is too far for the roots to reach.

The Round-Up



FOLKS, we are going to get right down to the business of giving you the low-down on another author. This time it is that pert word-slinger, M. McCluer Brown. The life of this writer is a colorful one indeed, more vivid than fiction.

While you might not guess it, we're going to be honest and tell you that "M" stands for Mary.

Life began for Mary Brown in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Her mother was a real lady from the old South and hated the West. Her father had lived in it most of his life, part of the time among Indians, and loved it. Shortly after Mary was born, her father decided that city life was too dull and decided to strike out for wilder places. He built a covered wagon and started out for Jackson's Hole, which he heard was open to homesteaders who dared to force their way in, so he put the unhappy mother and the four children—three boys and a girl—into the wagon and set out. They crossed Tahoggatie Pass in November, 1909, and took up a place in a lowland bounded on two sides by the Buffalo River and on the other by the Snake River. It was here the family was raised. They had a fair spread of cattle, and each of the children had saddle horses and guns of their own. They learned to ski and snowshoe; to hunt and trap fish and shoot and ride. She claims that she never did anything as well as her three brothers except to go into tantrums of rage, which her brothers so dreaded that they were willing to overlook her other deficiencies and let her tag along with them.

Their nearest neighbors across the Buffalo were forest service men, and it was not long before her father joined forces with them and it was then that they began to rub elbows with all manner of men. Jackson's Hole was a place to hide from the law, so they knew outlaws, rustlers, remittance men, cow-punchers, men and women with questionable pasts and, of course, people like themselves who were glad to have the government men bring a real law into the country. It was often said in those days that, "If you're out, you can't get in, and if you're in, you can't get out!"—a saying that was uncomfortably true, though it had as much to do with the natural

blocking of the two mountain passes by snow-slides, land slides, high rivers and lack of funds as it did to those who made themselves notorious.

The first year that the Brown family lived in Jackson Hole they nearly starved and froze to death, because they were obliged to live in a tent with the thermometer registering fifty degrees below zero. If it had not been for the abundance of wild animals, fowl and fish, the people in Jackson's Hole would have starved long ago. The altitude is too high, the frosts too early and the summers too short to raise many vegetables or grains. When they lived there, the passes were too rough to risk having perishables sent in to them, and if their misguided relatives sent them anything, they were lucky to get the empty box.

At that time Jackson's Hole was beautiful but untamed. Miss Brown has heard men say that it casts a spell paralleling the African jungle, which draws and sobers a man and leaves its stamp on him. She herself says that they lived every minute with a feeling of suspense as if they were waiting for something to happen, and it always did!

Most of her exciting experiences had to do with animals. One time she sat up in bed in the dead of night and saw a wolf staring through the window right beside her. That was a winter when food was particularly low. The snow was on a level with her window and the moonlight on it was almost as bright as day. She said she sat there shaking with fear, knowing that the window was loose in the frame, and when she heard her dog whimpering against the door, she became more frightened than ever. She felt as she watched that wolf scratching against the window that a thousand years slipped by before she could let out a yell that brought her father running to her rescue.

Another time she and her brothers ran out of the door one morning to come face to face with a big bull moose. That was in the winter, too, when the snow was so deep that they had to dig a tunnel from the door to the snow level. The tunnel that morning was slick with ice, and when she made a dive for the door, her feet slipped out from under her and she came down on her face, shot head first down the tunnel, and to cap the climax, split her head wide open on an ax.

Snake River is an important skeleton in the Hole closet and claimed its toll of life yearly. Some of the unfortunates went to their death in its whirlpools and some were thrown in to hide the evidence and real manner of their death.

So you can see that little Miss Brown has done some real and pretty terrific living. She says she can't remember the time that she didn't want to write, even before she was able to read.

Writing is not easy for her, but she declares that she wouldn't give it up even if she never sold another story. It satisfies a certain inner feeling that nothing else has. She has traveled most of the Northwestern States, lived in a tent during the summer in government reclamation camps, and gone to school in the winter.

Although Mary Brown is still well this side of thirty, she has many accomplishments. She has studied voice, plays a cornet, has done "extra" work in the movies, written a few poems which were published, and had some experience in aviation. Quite a girl, we'd say!

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

"HOW can I tell gold when I find it?" pointedly writes T. S., of Knoxville, Tennessee. "I am very interested in hard-rock prospecting for gold lodes and intend to tackle the game seriously this summer. I have had some mining experience in the Illinois coal fields, but am a complete greenhorn when it comes to gold. Anything additional you can tell me about gold prospecting will be much appreciated."

With a little experience, T. S., gold can be and usually is identified by sight. Think it over and you will realize why this is so. How many soft, extremely heavy, yellow minerals with a metallic luster are found in Nature?

There is only one that satisfies all these simple conditions—gold. Another correspondent recently wrote us on the same subject, "The only way I could tell gold was if it had the American eagle stamped on it." Well, if you can tell it with the eagle on it, you can tell it without. It looks the same. It is yellow and heavy, possibly not so shiny, but with a definite metallic appearance.

Another easy identifying characteristic of gold is the fact that it is extremely malleable. A small piece can be flattened by hammer blows without breaking. It can be pounded into a thin leaf. One wham with the hammer on fool's-gold minerals that might be mistaken for the real McCoy and the former crumble to powder—rock dust that is dull gray or black, in spite of the brassy metallic look of the original piece.

Gold can be cut or scratched readily with a knife. That's how soft the natural article is. A needle point can be stuck into a tiny flake of gold and it will leave a small pin

prick. Try that with fool's gold—yellow pyrites—and see how far you get. A needle will glance off fool's gold, and the mineral is too hard to scratch with a knife.

Another mineral that the inexperienced sometimes confuse with gold, particularly those that try fancy chemical tests without fully understanding them, is mica—yellow mica flakes, or fragments. They shine under water in stream and creek beds, and frequently in the sand around bubbling springs. What's more they are fairly common in regions that are not metallically mineralized. Acids don't bother mica. The mineral is strongly acid resistant.

But you can split even small and thin mica plates apart with the finger-nail. You can scratch it with a knife and scrape a whitish powder off on the point of the plate. You can pound it to dust with a hammer. And above all, mica is a very light mineral. It hasn't the weight and body of a tiny gold fragment.

If you are washing gravel that contains mica in a gold pan, the mica is so light it is almost the first mineral or material to wash over the lip of the pan. Real gold will never act that way. Being heavy it settles almost immediately to the bottom of the pan and hangs there while the sand and other material is being washed out.

Here's another safeguard against, not only blasted hopes but wasted effort as well. Gold in any commercial quantity is a rare mineral, although widely distributed. It is rarer than mica, or the pyrites that are sometimes mistaken for gold. If after careful study of the mineral in question and application of the foregoing physical tests, you are still in doubt as to the identity of the stuff, the chances are the material is *not* gold.

Of course, not all gold-bearing rock contains free gold, that is, gold that can be liberated from the gangue material by grinding a sample and panning it, or gold visible to the naked eye in the vein matter. However, particularly in surface outcrops, where the gold content assays rich, it usually can be seen, or panned out of ground-up samples. When the gold values occur as sulphide—sulphide ore—a regular assay by a competent assayer is required to tell how much gold, if any, the ore contains.

The chief vein mineral in which gold deposits usually occur is quartz. There are, of course, exceptions, as there are to almost every rule of prospecting and mining. But quartz is the predominating gold gangue. Generally there is a lot of quartz in mineralized areas. Unfortunately not all of it contains metal. Usually only a very small per cent. "Bull quartz," that is, hard, compact, glass-looking quartz is very seldom gold-bearing. Quartz stained with iron streaks, or showing cavities lined with iron rust, or little crystals of quartz is more apt to be promising.

We have already given T. S. an address from which an excellent informative free booklet on lode gold prospecting may be obtained, and we will be glad to do the same for other interested readers. Simply send in your request promptly, inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your reply and mail it to the Mines And Mining Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

To Al White, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania: Lands below high tide are not subject to mineral location under the Federal Mining Statutes.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by

HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

STRETCHING from north to south in the Inyo country and approaching the Nevada line is Death Valley of southern California. A gold-bearing quartz ledge has been prospected there by "Death Valley Vagabond" who is looking for a partner to help him recover the gold.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Most of the forty-five years of my life have been spent in mining and prospecting. It is my intention to go into Death Valley, as I know where there is a gold-bearing quartz ledge. And as I need some one to go along with me I take this means of appealing for a grubstake pardner. I want some one who has the gambling spirit and the prospecting bug strong enough to finance a six months' trip. Enroute we will do some fishing, some placering, and a little hunting. I know how to do them all, and I know some good places where they can be found.

I have the necessary camping outfit, cooking outfit—yes, I can cook, too—and I have the tent, car, etc. All an active partner would need would be fishing and hunting equipment, individual mining outfit, personal effects, et cetera. Any one with lung trouble, asthma, catarrh or sinus trouble would be greatly benefited as I know what the desert does for them.

Yes, I "know the desert;" also its scorpions, gila monsters, and rattlesnakes. And I've seen a few mirages. But this ledge is no mirage. It's there. I could say it was a yard wide and all gold, but I won't! It is a quartz ledge with gold in it, and I can sure prove that!

To any one enjoying outdoor life and

looking for adventure, sport, better health, and the companionship of a man who is "on the square" and wanting to make such a trip, I say to him—write me about yourself. I'll answer all letters in the order received. So remember—first come, first served! DEATH VALLEY VAGABOND.

Care of The Tree.

"Girl of the North" will make a mighty interesting Pen Pal, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Seeing new country is my main interest, and so far I've been in seven States. I am a girl who is working her way from State to State. There have been many hardships and much worry, but I feel I have been fortunate in many ways in spite of the heartaches I have known. I worked my way from a Northern State to Wyoming. Many are the times I've been real hungry, coming into strange large towns with only a few pennies to my name, but I've secured work of some kind and it matters little how hard the labor is. I've herded cattle in northern Minnesota, cooked in cook cars in North Dakota, and in sheep camps in the mountains. I'll milk cows and work in the fields if I must.

After this spring's cooking job is over I hope to have enough money for a ticket out to the coast. I so want to see the ocean for the first time in my life. I hope to secure work of some kind on the Oregon coast.

I am twenty-four years old. If my mother were alive or if I had a home of any kind I am sure I wouldn't roam about so much. Letters from any one will mean so much to me, and all will be answered.

GIRL OF THE NORTH.

Care of The Tree.

John wants correspondents from the out-of-the-way places.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

A young lad from the hard-coal regions of Pennsylvania is speaking up. I am interested in outdoor life. I would like to live and work on some ranch, farm, forest, etc., in the West or some other place that is far away from the cities. If any homesteader, farmer, rancher, or trapper is looking for an honest, congenial helper, please write. I would like to hear from all who may be interested. JOHN JORDAN.

500 South Pearl Street,
Shamokin, Pennsylvania.

Hans hails from Denmark.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a Danish seaman, and I would like to join The Hollow Tree. I am interested in stamp collecting, and I will exchange Danish stamps for all the British Silver Jubilee stamps. I hope to get a letter from every part of the world. I will answer all letters. I am forty-three years old, and my home town is Copenhagen.

HANS JENSEN.

N/S "Nordhavet," D/S Norden,
Amaliegade, 49,
Copenhagen, K., Denmark.

Have any of you hombres been wanting to take a pasear over Death Valley way? If so, you will want to hear what "Death Valley Vagabond" has to say about the gold-bearing quartz ledge. He's looking for a pard. So wear your friend-maker, membership badges, boys, and just talk right up to this desert prospector.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering be sure to state which you wish.

An old-time Oregon hombre is looking for a pard.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Is there an hombre who would like to ride herd on a flock of poultry? I need a partner on my chicken ranch as I have a six-acre place right on the State highway, with a little gas station and a quick-lunch counter. Now any old hombre with even a wooden leg who could wrestle with the pots and pans, gather up the eggs, or wipe a windshield can find a home here with me. I have found that it pays to raise the hen that lays, so why should I not share my good fortune with some good honest pard? And if any of you folks wish information about this part of Oregon just drop me a line, but please inclose a stamp.

DAVID A. WRIGHT.

Box 127, Bandon, Oregon.

Here's an hombre from sunny southern Alberta.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Sunny southern Alberta is my home. I am a lonely young fellow of nineteen years. I would appreciate letters from all over the world. One of my hobbies is obtaining autographs from different parts of the world, so the more remote the places from which the letters come the more pleased I shall be. However, I will do my best to answer all letters, so come on, everybody, and cheer me up a bit.

WILLIAM F. STAFFORD.

Barons, Alberta, Canada.

From far-off South Africa comes this young lad seeking Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

How would Pen Pals hailing from all four corners of the earth like to write to a South African chap who is anxious to hear from everywhere? I am seventeen years of age, and I live in the center of sunny South Africa. I would like to exchange snapshots and news of our different countries; yes, and especially stamps! Now, come on, folks, please write to your South African friend.

PETER VAN DER WATH.

13 Berg Street, Bloemfontein,
Orange Free State, South Africa.

Homer is an Oregon boy who can give you historical information about his section of the country.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Here is a seventeen-year-old boy who has never been more than one hundred and fifty miles from home. I was born in Oregon, and I have lived here all my life. I am interested in hunting, fishing, swimming, reading, and aviation; also boats. I can give historical information about this section of the country that has been given to me by folks who have lived here since Civil War days. I would like to hear from any one, anywhere. HOMER MARINOS.

2336 Washington Street,
Milwaukee, Oregon.

Outdoor girls will want to be Pen Pals to Frances.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Hello, folks! I am a girl of eighteen. I am an outdoor girl and love all outdoor sports. My hobby is riding and taking care of horses. I like roans and white horses the best. I live in the southwestern corner of Tennessee. Some day I hope to live on a ranch in the West and I would like to have some Pen Pals from the West who can tell me all about horses and the life of the West.

I promise to be a good Pen Pal to all.

FRANCES EATON.

Millbranch Road,
Whitehaven, Tennessee.

You folks who are interested in making a change in locality may care to consider W. E. M.'s offer.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

There are no doubt a number of people who desire to make a change from the locality where they are now living. I find myself wanting to do just this. I have about sixteen hundred acres of land in northeastern New Mexico that I would exchange for land in another locality. I prefer a range stock country in the mountain foothills, and I have no objection if it is a long way from town and railroads. This land that I have is in the mountain rain belt, close to a small town where there is a good school. Hay and small grain crops do well.

Let's hear from you folks who want to change location. We might help each other. W. E. M.

Care of The Tree.

Girls in Holland and Hawaii are especially asked to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

"Corky" is the name I am best known by. I am a girl of sixteen years, and a senior in high school. My favorite sports are swimming and horseback riding. I would love to have friends from all over the world, but preferably from Holland and Hawaii. CORKY.

Care of The Tree.

This junior member hails from Burbank, California.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My favorite hobby is collecting full match-folders, and I also have a few foreign coins and stamps. Sports also hold an interest for me, especially football, boxing, and wrestling. I am a boy of fourteen, and I would like to correspond with Pen Pals from all over the world. STANLEY SMITH.

626 North Magnolia Boulevard,
Burbank, California.

WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

PERHAPS you are one of those hombres who enjoys adventuring into country off the beaten track, where you can gratify your longing for real primitive living. There's nothing like it for smoothing out both facial and mental wrinkles and making a new man of you. At any rate, here's a young fellow, Mark D., of Salt Lake City, Utah, who thinks he'd like to try it, and wants some advice as to a likely spot in which to rusticate.

"I am eager to spend my vacation this year in more or less primitive country, Mr. North, riding and hiking and meditating beside my own quiet campfire: fishing, too, of course. I had rather thought of going into Oregon. Can you suggest a

good location in the Beaver State for the sort of vacation I have in mind?"

If Oregon appeals to you, Mark, why don't you try the Mount Jefferson country? I think you would find it ideal for the type of sojourn you plan. You know, there's an area of approximately 16,000 acres in the northwest corner of the Deschutes National Forest, which, because of its rugged, undeveloped wild nature is known as the Mount Jefferson Primitive Area. It includes the mountain itself, and the heads of Candle and Cabot Creeks, and all of the high Cascade Divide south of Rockpile Mountain. It also includes a number of acres in the Santiam National Forest and also in the Mount Hood National Forest, so it's a big stretch of vacation country.

Since the plan is to preserve as far as possible, the original condition of this primitive and scenic locality, roads are not permitted. And only such foot and horse trails as are necessary for fire protection are built. The Oregon Skyline Trail crosses the west slope of the area, north and south, and a number of secondary trails have been built and plainly marked.

Jefferson Park, which is located at the base of the mountain on the north side, has many clear lakes and green meadows; it is one of Oregon's beauty spots, and is about six miles from Breitenbush Lake by trail. Nearly all of the many lakes found in the Primitive Area are stocked with trout, and the fishing is very good.

To reach the Primitive Area from the south, turn north off the McKenzie Highway at Sisters, located 22 miles northwest of Bend, Oregon, and go to Camp Sherman. From the Ranger Station there, you can secure your campfire permit, maps, and any other information you think you might need. By studying the forest maps you will be able to work out some interesting trips. Three miles from Camp Sherman at Heisings Resort, you can rent a horse, and also a guide, if you want one.

Don't forget it is going to be cold in those high altitudes at night, so take enough warm bedding, and a canvas tarpaulin. With your cooking utensils and food supplies packed inside your bedding, tie your pack behind the saddle, and be off for the best holiday you ever had, Mark, and here's lot of luck to you.

SPECIAL NOTICE

A FIRST-AID KIT FOR CAMPING

A little medicine kit is indispensible on that jaunt into the wilderness. If you want to assemble your own and would like suggestions as to the necessities, write to John North, in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

There's a tent for every type of camping. Be sure to pick the one best suited to the particular outing you are planning. If in doubt, John North has some advice on the subject which he'll gladly forward. Just write him, in care of this magazine.

All set to spend his vacation in his favorite pursuit, angling, and especially for striped bass, Joe E., of Tucson, Arizona, has some questions to put.

"I understand there is good striped bass fishing in central California, Mr. North, and I'd like to trek up that way this summer and try my luck. Just where would you advise me to go? What about the season? Any other information on the subject will be appreciated."

You can take striped bass in all the rivers and bays of central California, Joe, and at the ocean beaches, too. They are, as you may know, almost exclusively a California fish, and are not found in the other Western States. They are limited to the territory in the San Francisco Bay area, the lower Sacramento Valley, upper San Joaquin Valley and along the beaches from the southern part of Monterey Bay to the Russian River, seventy miles north of San Francisco.

The season is open the year around for fishing, and the fish ran in size from two to three pounds up to fifty pounders. The best places are in the lower parts of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and tributary sloughs in the vicinity of Martinez, Antioch, Rio Vista, Vallejo, Napa, in San Francisco Bay near Greenbrae and San Rafael, and at the beaches near San Francisco.

When a "run" is on at the beaches, there are hundreds of surf casters out every day. Striped bass up to fifty pounds have been taken from San Francisco beaches and piers, and fish running from fifteen to twenty pounds are quite common when the fish are feeding close to the shore. Good luck to you, Joe!

Art G., of San Francisco, California, has picked southwest Utah as a land well worth exploring.

"I'm going to drive up into southwest Utah this year on a motor camp trip, Mr. North, as I know there is some wonderful scenery to be found in that part of the West. What is the best road to follow from my city? Any suggestions you can make regarding the trip will be much appreciated."

There are three routes you can take from your city to this very interesting country you mention, Art; one via Las Vegas, Nevada, another by way of Salt Lake City, Utah, and still another via Ely, Nevada. Although the Ely route is less improved than the others you may find it worth while because near the Utah line it runs close to the Lehman Caves, not very well known, but very beautiful. From Salt Lake you motor down toward Utah's Dixie through intriguing country. At Fillmore is the site of Utah's old State House. East of Beaver and high in the Parowan Mountains is Puffer Lake, a favorite with many campers.

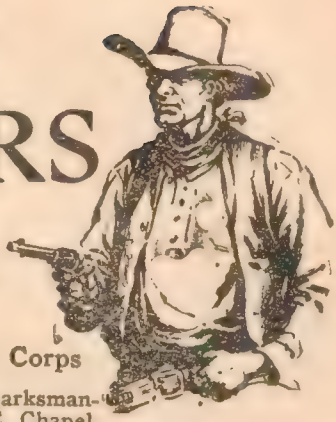
If, however, you lean toward primitive country, leave Highway 91 before you get to Fillmore, cut over east from Nephi in the Wasatch Mountains, to join Highway 89 and follow it south to Sugurd, whence a side road juts out east to Torrey and Hanksville, either of which is the jumping off place for wonderful undeveloped Utah, such as Fish Lake, one of the best stocked to be found, Aquarius Plateau, covered with lakes and dotted with woods, Wayne Wonderland, and the Dirty Devil River that flows into the Colorado.

Whichever road you take, don't leave the Mormon State without seeing the national park country. Bryce Canyon National Park, Cedar Breaks National Monument, and Zion National Park are all within a radius of fifty miles, and joined by good roads.

GUNS AND GUNNERS

By

CHARLES E. CHAPEL



First Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

Address inquiries regarding firearms, marksmanship, and hunting, to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, "Guns And Gunners," Street & Smith's WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope.

COLONEL TOWNSEND WHELEN, U. S. army, retired, is probably the outstanding authority on rifles and rifle shooting in this country. We are proud to number him among the enthusiastic readers of this column, and glad to give a few brief facts about his career in answer to the requests of hundreds of readers.

Colonel Whelen started his hunting career in 1892. His hunting camps have extended over the entire North American continent from Panama to the Arctic, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The only game in American which has escaped his gun is the musk oxen. In 1896, as a member of the Pennsylvania National Guard, he qualified as a sharpshooter. Entering the regular army in 1902, he won the rifle championship of the entire army in 1903. As a member of the infantry rifle team from 1903 to 1909, he won many competitions, and is still outstanding as a match winner.

In 1930, Colonel Whelen transferred from the infantry to the ordance. He has held many important posts, including the command of Frankford Arsenal, and director of research and experiment at Springfield Armory. In 1935, he retired from the army after 33 years' service, and is now the manager of the gun department of the National Target & Supply Co., in Washington, D. C. In appreciation of the work of "Guns And Gunners," he has presented us with a truckload of .22-caliber, 50-foot rifle targets for free distribution to our readers, five to each, with no strings attached. Simply send us a stamped, addressed envelope.

Mexican weapons.

E. W. S., Brooklyn, New York: Mexican army weapons include the Mauser rifle, Mendoza light machine gun, the Hotchkiss, Colt, Vickers, and Thompson machine guns, and the Chaumound-Mondragon, Mondragon, and Vickers guns. From this it can be seen that variety is appreciated below the Rio Grande.

Aiming device.

D. A. C., Kansas City, Kansas: An aiming device is an attachment

for a rifle which enables the coach to see the reflection of the sights in a mirror, and at the same time see the target, thus enabling him to correct mistakes in aim.

Double-action powder.

C. F. H., Itasca Station, Wisconsin: Energy applied to an object already in motion moves it forward faster than the same energy applied when it is at rest. This principle is used in making high velocity .22-caliber cartridges. The powder in the case has a slow and progressive burning quality that first starts the bullet moving, and then, when the pressure has been built up, gives the bullet an extra push that adds greatly to its speed.

Rifle elevation changes.

T. T. H., Laredo, Texas: A new rifle gets the same results for the first 100 or 200 rounds, but after that it settles down into the stock, and may require a new sight setting to get the results obtained at first. This can be controlled somewhat by seeing that the screws that hold the action to the stock are kept tight. The presence of metal fouling in the bore may change the elevation, too, but the careful shooter does not permit this condition to exist.

Lubricants.

P. B. V., Nome, Alaska: In extremely cold regions, lubricating oil gets gummy and automatic weapons fail to function. Your choice lie between trading your automatic pistol for a revolver, and the alternative of using finely powdered graphite instead of oil as a lubricant.

Modern police pistols.

E. W. B., Winchester, Virginia: Recent press comments show that the Metropolitan Police of Washington, D. C., have purchased six Magnum pistols, of a type manufactured solely for the police, and for naval and military use—not for private citizens. In a later issue we shall describe fully these powerful new weapons.

Firearms catalogs.

Gun enthusiasts cannot expect to understand fully their hobby unless they have a rather complete collection of catalogs and instruction pamphlets from the various manufacturers. Many of these publications are really handbooks with more pages devoted to information than to descriptions of their wares. A few gun makers charge for their catalogs, while others expect an individual unknown to them to send four cents postage. Fortunately, we can send our readers 98 per cent of all the catalogs and pamphlets at no charge. Please be specific about your needs. Do not say, "Send me everything."

The U. S. Rifle, (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, in excellent condition, is sold to citizens of the United States, by the government, for $8.87, under certain conditions which will be explained to readers sending a stamped, addressed envelope.

A ten-cent handbook for boy and girl marksmen will be mailed *free*, as long as the supply lasts, to those who request it. Please inclose the usual stamped, addressed envelope.

These assertions are the private opinion of the firearms editor, and are not to be construed as official, or reflecting the views of the Navy Department, or the naval service at large.

MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

JONES, ELMER GEORGE.—He left home about nine years ago and was last heard of in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1929. He is tall, with a light complexion, light wavy hair, and blue eyes. He is thirty-one years of age and weighs about one hundred and fifty-six pounds. Is tattooed on his right arm, a girl and an anchor. Please, son, come home before it is too late. I am in poor health. Alvah is married and has five children, three boys and two girls. He lives in Rochester, Vermont. Your sister comes to see me every year. She still lives in Rochester, New York. We all miss you and want to see you. Come home, all is forgiven. Your mother, Mrs. Hattie Summers, Box 245, Bethel, Vermont.

REESE, FRED NORMAN.—Last heard from in 1924. He was then in Florala, Alabama. Any one having news of him kindly get in touch with Tyson Reese, 807 Cedar Street, Greenville, Alabama.

KEARNS, THOMAS F.—Last heard from when he was in Texas. Please write to Ida Mae, care of Western Story Magazine.

DENYBERRY, WILBURN HADLEY.—My brother who is thirty-years of age, five feet seven inches tall, and weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. He has a fair complexion, light hair, and blue eyes. He has been missing for nine years. Mother is dead and daddy is getting old. I need him very much. I love him dearly and wish to find him. Information appreciated by Annie W. Denyberry, 713 3rd Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee.

HOWORTH or NEWEL.—The Howorth family: Dorothy, Floyd, Delbert, Mable, Amy-Lee and the following uncles, Howard and George Newel. Last heard of in Dryod, Washington, in 1929. Any one knowing the whereabouts or addresses of any of the above please write to Miss Violet Brown, Route 1, Parma, Idaho.

ROLLISON.—Last heard from twenty-five years ago. Mother and father have passed to the Great Beyond. You are now a grandpa. Your father was known as pipe maker. Would like to hear from you. Please write to E, care of Western Story Magazine.

MERRIFIELD, EARNEST CLEON.—My son who was last heard of in December, 1929, when he was working at Big Falls, Minnesota, at a logging camp. He is five feet eight inches tall, has medium brown hair and eyes and weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. The first joint of his index finger on his left hand is missing. Any information would be highly appreciated by Mrs. George Garrett, 315 East Division Street, Colfax, Iowa.

OLD SCHOOL FRIENDS.—My mother died in Denver and we moved back to Kansas City in 1896. I was then fifteen years of age. I married in 1898. Would like to hear from old friends from Denver, Wyandotte, Armourdale, and Kansas City. Please write to Mrs. Maude Chance Canthon, 514 West Broadway, Henryetta, Oklahoma.

IVIES, WILLIAM.—He was in the government service from 1917 to 1918. Please write to your old friend, the Diary Man, 229 State Highway, Route 25, Rahway, New Jersey.

OLIVER, JAMES NEVILLE.—Last heard of in California, in 1922. James H. Oliver has passed away. Have important news for you. Please write to your mother, Mrs. C. Oliver, 1212½ Garfield Avenue, Yakima, Washington.

BOYD, MRS.—My aunt who lived at one time in Commercial Road, London, England. She has six brothers. My father who has been dead a good many years is her brother. He used to correspond with her. I would like to hear from her. Mr. J. Blain, 198 Belmont Avenue, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

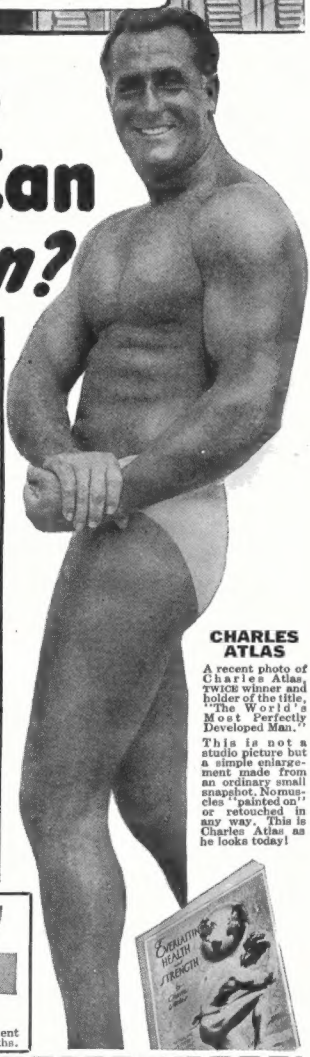
PHILLIPS, J. W.—Last seen in Evergreen, Alabama, in 1924. He is twenty years of age. His father was employed by an insurance company. Any information concerning him or his family will be greatly appreciated by John W. Edwards, care Postal Telegraph Co., Montgomery, Alabama.

MENSCH, SAM.—He was last heard from in Kansas City, May 5, 1929, when he was on his way to Boulder Dam in Nevada. He has brown eyes, black curly hair, weighs about one hundred and forty pounds and is five feet two inches tall. He is fifty-two years of age. Any news of him will be greatly appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Anna Schriner, 1040 Water Street, Shamokin, Pennsylvania.

NEWMAN, ALBERT ROLAND or SPUD.—My brother who was discharged from the army air corps during the middle of April, 1936. At one time he was at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, and at another time at March Field, California. He was discharged from both of these places. Any one knowing anything about him please notify Private Gordon H. Newman, Ser. Co., 38th Inf., Fort Douglas, Utah.

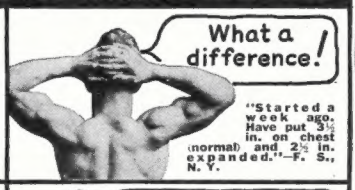
HARE or HAIR, GEORGE.—He was a railroad man in Denver, Colorado, in 1926 and 1927. He moved to California. Last heard of at Kearns in 1926. Any one knowing his whereabouts please notify Mrs. Mattie Anderson, 1663 Tremont Street, Los Angeles, California.

Will You Give Me 7 Days to PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*

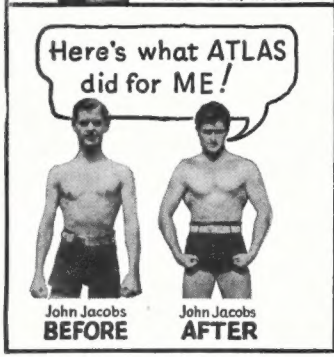


LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

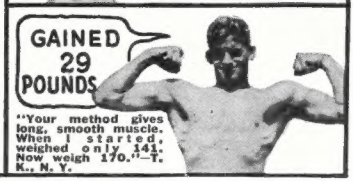
"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1½ in., chest 2½ in., forearm ½ in., and I have gained 4 lbs."—C. S., W. Va.



"Started a week ago. Have put 3½ in. on chest (normal) and 2½ in. expanded."—F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"—W. G., N. J.



"Your method gives long, smooth muscle. When I started, weighed only 141. Now weigh 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

A recent photo of Charles Atlas, TWICE winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This is not a studio picture but a simple enlargement made from an ordinary small snapshot. No muscles "painted on" or retouched in any way. This is Charles Atlas as he looks today!

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

I could fill this whole magazine with enthusiastic reports from OTHERS. But what you want to know is—"What can Atlas do for ME?"

Find out—at my risk! Right in first 7 days I'll start to PROVE I can turn YOU into a man of might and muscle. And it will be the kind of PROOF you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

My FREE BOOK tells about my amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER—an offer no other instructor has ever DARED make! If YOU want smashing strength, big muscles, glowing health—I'll show you results QUICK!

Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away
This valuable cup, of solid sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.
I will award it, engraved, to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

FREE BOOK

I myself was once a 97-pound weakling—sickly, half-alive. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension." And I twice won—against all comers—the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"!

I have no use for apparatus. "Dynamic Tension" ALONE **(right in your own home)** will start new inches of massive power pushing out your chest—build up your shoulders to champion huskiness—put regular mountains of muscle on your biceps—free you of constipation, pimples—make those stomach muscles of yours hard ridges!

Make me PROVE it! Gamble a postage stamp. Send coupon for my **FREE BOOK AT ONCE!** Address me personally: **Charles Atlas, Dept. 38V, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 38V,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N.Y.

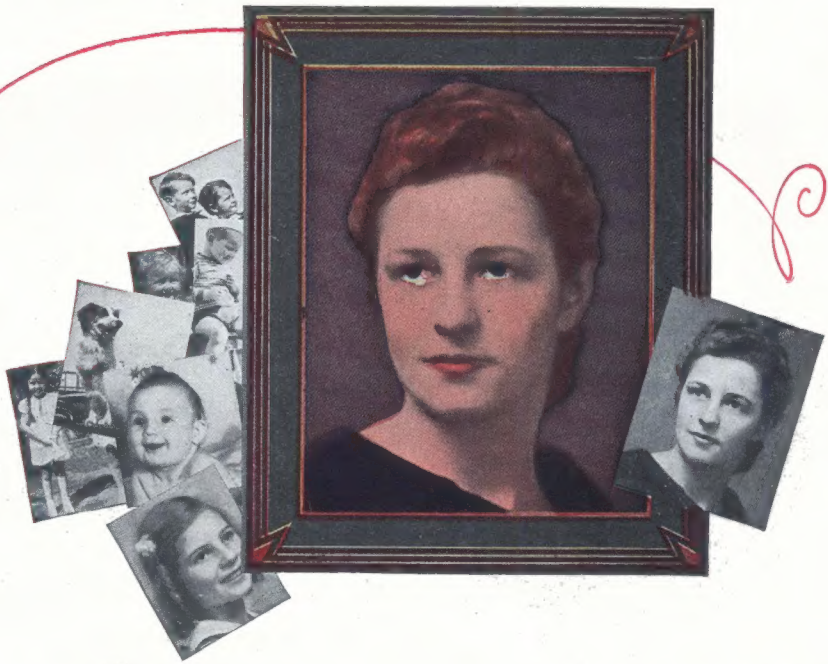
I want proof that DYNAMIC TENSION will make a new man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."**

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City..... State.....

England—40-42 Chandos Street, London, W. C. 2



A rich $2.50 salon quality 8 x 10 enlargement... hand colored... in this exquisite frame...

HERE'S the most amazing offer ever made in the history of the photographic industry. You would ordinarily expect to pay $1.50 upwards for an artistically, hand colored, salon quality photo enlargement . . . with this sensational bargain offer, you get a life-like hand colored 8x10 salon quality enlargement and the deluxe simulated leather, easel back frame pictured at the top of this advertisement all for $1.00 . . . this frame alone would be considered a genuine bargain anywhere for $1.00.

Your photo is enlarged and **hand colored** to portray a life-like likeness by expert artists who specialize in life paintings . . . you will be thrilled because these enlarged hand colored photographs seem to actually live . . . they all but talk. A true lifetime of pleasure from your photographic treasure.

The frame is selected, exceptionally high quality, in modern design . . . the last word . . . has beveled edge, which you only find in high priced, expensive frames. The easel back permits you to stand it anywhere you choose. Just send us your favorite snapshot or negative today! Our new method enlarges clearly . . . beautifully . . . life-like . . . looks like an expensive painting. FADELESS. Send bust, full length, groups, scenes, baby, mother, dad, sweetheart, animals, pets, baseball or football team or any subject. We enlarge to 8x10 and hand color from any clear photo negative or tintype. **WE GUARANTEE TO RETURN ORIGINALS IN PERFECT CONDITION.**

READ THIS STARTLING GUARANTEE

You must be 100% satisfied or you can return the frame and keep the hand colored 8x10 photo enlargement and get your dollar back.

Special Advice Send good, clear snaps or negatives for best reproduction—DO NOT MARK FRONT OF PICTURES —Write on separate piece of paper, when giving us special instructions.

Special . . .

1 EACH

3 of Same Subject $2.50

SPECIAL FEATURES

Money back if not 100% satisfied and you can keep the hand colored enlargement.

Hand colored 8x10 enlargement in deluxe, easel back, simulated leather frame all for $1.00.

At least a $2.50 value for $1.00.

Three hand colored enlargements and 3 frames of same subject $2.50 plus postage.

ECONOMY SUPPLY CO. (Photo Division)
Dept. 706, 150 Nassau St., New York

I accept your special offer . . . kindly enlarge the enclosed photo or negative to 8x10, hand color and frame. I agree to pay postman $1.00 plus postage on arrival. It is understood you will refund my $1 if I am not satisfied and I may keep the hand colored enlargement.

If 3 of same subject is wanted for $2.50 plus postage, mark X here ☐

Name .....

Address .....

NOTE: Outside U.S.A. $1.50 each. Cash with order.

SEND NO MONEY

Don't send a cent now! Just send a clear snapshot negative or photograph, any size of the subject you want enlarged to 8x10 and hand colored by one of our artists. We deliver to you in one of our beautiful deluxe, beveled edge, simulated leather frames. We put your photo to work immediately and ship promptly. When your postman delivers the package containing the hand colored enlargement and frame, pay him $1.00 plus postage. Your originals will be returned in the package in perfect condition . . . then examine your hand colored enlarged photo . . . you will enjoy a great surprise because of the high quality work and the exceptional value . . . so positive are we of this that we guarantee to refund your $1 if you are disappointed in any way . . . and you can keep the hand colored enlarge . . . rush the coupon now while this sensa offer is still open to readers of this magaz